

Prologue

Privet Drive was a perfectly normal street. It was lined with perfectly normal houses, one nearly identical to the next. The inhabitants of these homes were all perfectly normal people as well, save for one house. In this house lived a family who tried its hardest to be perfectly normal. But there has always been one aspect of Mr. and Mrs. Dursley's lives that has never been anything close to their definition of normal. That thing was sitting on his lumpy bed in the smallest room of the house, filled with their son's old, broken toys accumulated throughout his pampered life. That thing was none other than their nephew, Harry Potter.

Harry Potter didn't pay any attention to the numerous objects strewn about his room. He sat motionless on his bed staring unseeingly at the bare wall in front of him. He had been sitting in the same position since he had returned to his "home" for the summer exactly 36 hours ago. Harry Potter had not eaten, slept, spoken a word, nor even averted his gaze in all that time.

It was his snowy white owl, Hedwig, who finally broke Harry out of his reverie. Returning from her nighttime hunt, she alighted on his shoulder and nipped affectionately at his ear, giving a soft hoot. Broken from his trance, Harry glanced at his bedside clock to find that it was just after 3:00 in the morning. Harry absentmindedly stroked Hedwig's feathers as he realized something else he'd neglected to do in the past 36 hours. He then promptly ran out of his room to use the loo, leaving an indignant owl in his wake.

Finished relieving himself of his most pressing concern, Harry realized how hungry he was. A growl from his stomach reaffirmed his decision to sneak down to the kitchen to scrounge up something to eat. He quietly made his way through the hallway and down the stairs, careful to avoid the floorboards and steps that he knew to creak. Once reaching his destination, he set out to make himself a sandwich. It only took Harry two bites before realizing that despite his obvious hunger he didn't have much of an appetite.

Harry forced his way through the rest of his sandwich despite the rising sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Finished with his

midnight meal, Harry cleaned up after himself and soundlessly made his way back up the stairs and into his bedroom where he collapsed onto his bed and promptly dropped off into a fitful night's sleep.

The next few days progressed in much the same manner for Harry. He only ever left his room in the middle of the night, and he had not encountered any of his relatives since the day they had picked him up from King's Cross Station. This was one of the very few things in his life for which he was grateful for at the moment.

He spent those days in bed drifting in and out of sleep. To be honest, Harry couldn't really tell the difference between his sleeping and waking hours for he continuously relived the same moments within his mind regardless of his state. Harry had become rather adept at avoiding and eluding his enemies. (He had been doing it since he was a baby when Voldemort first targeted him.) His years of practice could not help him this time though, for Harry Potter had become his own worst enemy, for the moment anyway. He did still have the darkest wizard of the century plotting his death.

Harry could not escape the mental images of that dreadful night when he dragged five of his closest friends from their school in Scotland to the Ministry of Magic in London into certain danger on a harebrained scheme to rescue his godfather from the clutches of Lord Voldemort. What Harry had not known at the time was that he was being duped by Voldemort; Sirius, his godfather, was actually safe and sound in his London home at the time. The ensuing disaster led to injury for all five of his friends plus several Order of the Phoenix members who had come to their rescue and worst of all, the death of his godfather, who had been a part of the rescue team.

The moment Harry relived most often in his mind was watching as his godfather fell through that accursed veil. This moment brought a mix of emotions through Harry: pain and grief at the loss of the closest thing to a father he had ever known, anger at his murderer, Sirius' own cousin Bellatrix Lestrange, anger at Sirius for not taking the duel seriously (if only he had attacked her rather than wasting time taunting her), helplessness as he could do nothing but watch as Sirius tumbled through the archway, and confusion as to what the bloody hell that veil was exactly.

Remus Lupin, Harry's only remaining connection to his long deceased parents, had held Harry back from following Sirius through the archway explaining that Sirius was gone and would not be coming back. Everyone he had talked to since then only reiterated this fact, yet Harry didn't understand how it worked. If the arch was a doorway to the world of the dead, shouldn't it work both ways? It wasn't as though Sirius had died properly, leaving behind his body while his spirit moved on to its next adventure. No, Sirius still had his body with him, and as far as Harry was concerned, that should mean that there was still hope that he could come back. Hope was all he had at this point.

When Harry wasn't brooding over his godfather's state, he was reliving the rest of the events of that evening. After the shock of Sirius' tumble through the veil, Harry had raced after Bellatrix and cast the worst curse he could think of on her: the Cruciatus Curse. It was this act more than anything else that stole Harry's appetite away. The thought of what he had done made him physically ill. He had cast an Unforgivable Curse. Not only that, he'd cast the worst Unforgivable in his mind. He wasn't looking for control or a quick death for Bellatrix; he wanted to inflict pain, to make Bellatrix suffer as he was suffering at the time, as he was still currently suffering. She had mocked him for his effort, for the curse did not work properly. He had learned the hard way that when casting the curse you had to actually enjoy causing others pain. If you didn't enjoy causing others pain you were only left with a feeling a self-loathing. Casting that curse had made Harry feel as though he was no better than Voldemort himself.

It was that feeling that had left Harry completely powerless when Voldemort confronted Harry that night and had allowed Voldemort to possess Harry and gain control over his body. Harry still shivered when he thought of that; it left him feeling as if he was dirty, tainted, like he was covered in dirt that would never wash off. His hatred of himself in conjunction with his grief over the loss of Sirius caused Harry to drop his guard and welcome death's sweet release. Had it not been for Albus Dumbledore's impeccable timing, Harry would have been reunited with his parents and godfather in the afterlife that

night. Being in the Headmaster's debt was not somewhere Harry wanted to be at the moment.

Harry learned later that night that the illustrious headmaster had been withholding quite a bit of information from him, not the least of which was the reason why Voldemort had tried to murder him almost fifteen years ago when he was only fifteen months old and the reason why Voldemort might want to lure Harry to the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry of Magic. Harry learned that a prophecy was made before he was born about the one who would have the power to defeat Voldemort. One line kept playing repeatedly in Harry's mind: "And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives." That is what Harry's life had come down to: kill or be killed. The entire war rested on Harry's shoulders, and nobody had saw fit to let him know or to help him prepare.

The headmaster thought it best to hide this from Harry for the five years since they had first met. Surely nothing bad ever came from acting out of ignorance, right? Dumbledore was the great puppet master in the story, and Harry realized that he'd been nothing but one of his puppets all along, his strings manipulated behind the scenes. Harry realized that the real weapon the Order had been guarding all along had been him and the knowledge that he was in fact their only weapon against Voldemort.

With this thought, Harry realized why he had been left with his viciously cruel relatives all his life and why he had no say even now in where he spent his summer vacations. No one ever worried about his well-being or happiness; they just wanted to make sure nothing damaged their precious weapon. Harry was sick of everything in his life right now: himself, his relatives, the Order, his headmaster, and more than anything else Harry was sick of feeling helpless and out of control in his life. It was this final thought that Harry focused on one night as he drifted off to sleep. Before sleep claimed him, he made a vow that no longer would he sit idly by and be manipulated. "From now on, my life is in my own hands. I'm taking control. If Voldemort wants to come kill me, let him come. Next time I'll be ready for him," Harry murmured as his eyelids began to droop and he finally succumbed to sleep.

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Visitor

Harry's dreams that night started out as they had ever since he had lost Sirius. He watched in despair, feeling helpless as his godfather fell through the veil again and again, when a familiar voice startled him: "You really do need to stop brooding so much like this, Harry."

Harry whirled around and felt his jaw hit the floor. "Si—Sirius?" He barely managed to whisper.

"In the flesh." At Harry's pained expression he hastily added, "Sorry, wrong thing to say given my current state, but yeah, kid, it's me."

Harry felt the tears welling up in his eyes as his all too familiar feelings of guilt quickly surfaced. Holding back his tears, he barely managed to choke out, "I'm so sorry Sirius. It's all m-my fault. If only I hadn't been so stupid...."

"Now hold it right there kiddo," Sirius interrupted. "I love you to pieces and all, but if you continue acting like this is all your fault, I'm not opposed to knocking some sense into you...literally," his trademark cocky grin firmly in place now.

"But...how...where...what..?" So many thoughts and emotions were racing through Harry's mind that he couldn't focus on any single one. Sirius was here talking to him, but Sirius was dead. It was his fault Sirius was dead, but Sirius didn't think so. But how was Sirius even here talking to him? Moreover, was it really even Sirius? Harry paused and took a breath. "How is this possible? ... Is it really you?"

"Articulate as always, I see. If I didn't know any better I'd think you were talking to a certain pretty Ravenclaw seeker." Sirius's smile widened as Harry's cheeks stained red behind the tear tracks. "You're better off without that one, Harry. She wasn't right for you. But to answer your question, it has to do with the veil and how I died. Because I still have my physical body on this side, I have stronger ties to this world than one ordinarily would. But before you go getting your hopes up, that doesn't mean I can come back, unless you want another dementor on your hands."

“Dementor?” Harry asked, confused as to just what his godfather was talking about. Where did dementors fit into all of this?

“That’s right. Once your soul passes on, it can never go back. Those who have come through the veil and gone back have been stripped of their souls and filled with an eternal yearning to fill the void that the split created, so they feed on the souls of others. Their real souls, for all we know, are lost forever somewhere in the process.”

Harry tried to wrap his mind around what he had just been told for a minute before resuming his questioning. “But I still don’t understand, how are you here talking to me? And where is here?” Harry realized that they were no longer in the Death Chamber in the DoM. Instead he found himself in an open field full of lush green grass with trees planted intermittently for as far as the eye could see.

“This is a figment of your imagination, or maybe my imagination,” Sirius replied waving his hand about at the landscape. “And as I was saying, my tie to the physical world is strong because I took my body with me. The connection will weaken over time, and I will eventually pass on entirely to the other side. Think of it as what the muggles call limbo or purgatory, sort of a waiting period. I’m not sure if I can visit anybody I want; you were the first one I tried. But from what I gather, it should be some time before I’m so far gone that I can no longer visit.”

“Have you seen my parents?” Harry blurted out, unable to contain himself once the question formed in his mind. He unconsciously took a step toward his godfather and was bouncing on the balls of his feet in anticipation.

Sirius’ grin faltered slightly as he began to reply. “I have, though not as much as I would have liked to. Because of my ties to the physical world, I can’t fully join those in the land of the dead. I’m sort of stuck in middle ground right now. I can talk to your parents for short periods of time, as I will be able to with you.”

“What did they say? Can they see me? Have they been watching? Did they say anything about me?” One question tumbled right after the other, as Harry was eager to learn more about his mum and dad.

Seeing Harry's hungry, almost desperate expression, Sirius decided not to tease Harry about this particular subject. He took a step towards Harry and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Aye, they've been keeping an eye on you over the years. Quite proud of you, they are. They had a few choice words for the Dursley's that I'd be afraid to let reach Mrs. Weasley's ears. Your mom's sick with worry about you given how you've been dealing with my death. She wishes you weren't so hard on yourself; James and I do as well."

"But..." Harry tried to interrupt, throwing off his godfather's comforting arm and taking a few steps past his godfather. How could he say that after he had gotten the man killed? How was he supposed to go easy on himself when he had his own godfather's death on his hands?

"But nothing, Harry!" Sirius cried in exasperation before Harry could even begin blaming himself again. Harry spun around to face him again. "There are a lot of people who share in the responsibility of what happened to me: Voldemort and Bellatrix being the two primary ones."

Harry scowled and looked like he wanted to object, but Sirius pressed on. "Let's not forget Dumbledore's part in this, keeping you in the dark for so long. I kept pleading with him to tell you, but he refused to see reason. I might've told you myself had I known the full story. All any of us were ever told was that the prophecy somehow concerned you and Voldemort. Had Dumbledore not been so foolhardy, Voldemort never would have been able to lure you there the way he did."

Getting to the point he was most anxious for, Sirius continued somewhat shakily, "Which brings me to why I've come to you tonight. I didn't come right away because I wanted to give you time to come to terms with my death. This past night you found something else to focus on, and I've come to help you with that."

Harry's face bore a mask of confusion. "I don't understand..."

"I'm here to help you take control of your life, Harry. You're a powerful wizard when you put your mind to it, and I've decided to help give you a push in the right direction. You'll need all the training you can get if

you're to face Voldemort. I'm actually shocked that Dumbledore hasn't taken over any part of your training yet. Seems rather foolish that he hasn't. He's left you unprepared to face your destiny. Had he taken over years ago rather than shielding you from your fate, you'd be well beyond where your abilities are now." Sirius' voice accumulated a touch of anger as he finished his thoughts.

"But how can you help me when you're...you're...dead?" Harry asked, voice trailing off to barely a whisper.

"Harry, am I not able to talk to you, interact with you, here?" Sirius questioned.

"Well yes, but..."

"And while you can't exactly perform magic outside of school in the real world yet, nothing is stopping you from doing so here." Harry's mouth hung open, and seeing that he wasn't going to be able to talk just yet, Sirius continued. "If you're really serious about taking control of your life, I'd like to help, Harry. I even have your first lesson all planned out. You'll need some way to move around quickly without being noticed, even by those who can see through invisibility cloaks. It's how I was able to move around after I escaped from Azkaban."

"You're gonna teach me to be an animagus?" Harry asked, shock and disbelief etched across his face.

Sirius's grin was back in full force as he replied, "That's the plan. And with any luck, you'll be something that can move quickly and unobtrusively. Here's hoping you'll be able to fly..."

"Fly...?" Harry muttered as his mind drifted off considering all the possibilities.

"Aye, it would make sense too. Flying's always been second nature to you, so it would be natural for that ability to manifest in your animagus form" Sirius remarked looking smug.

As Harry slowly recovered from his day dreaming of what his animagus form could be, a steely resolve glinted behind his eyes as

he locked them onto Sirius' gaze. "When do we start?" Harry asked in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

Sirius chuckled. "Now there's the Harry I know and love: man of action. Before we can really get started on that front, you'll need to find your animagus form. To do that you'll need to brew a potion that will put you into a meditative state where you will meet the animal form inside you. Here's how the potion goes..."

Harry was gently awoken for the first time in so long that he couldn't even remember. The sun was peeking through the curtains adorning his window, casting beams of light across his face. He rose feeling better than he had for a few weeks...hell, for a few months even. He had a purpose in his life now and a plan. Granted the plan only covered the start of his training, but compared to the helpless, purposeless feeling that had filled him just the day before, Harry felt like a new man.

Harry broke his monotonous routine of spending the day in bed by going downstairs for breakfast. He walked into the kitchen to find his relatives already there working on breakfast. His aunt was at the stove cooking up some scrambled eggs. She dropped the frying pan she had been holding when she noticed Harry's presence. Luckily, it was only a couple inches off the stove at that point and only a bit of egg managed to fly out of the pan. His uncle's face had been hidden behind the morning paper. When he heard the pan drop, he looked up and caught sight of his nephew. They both looked shocked to see him as if they had completely forgotten he was even living there at the moment. His cousin, Dudley, was nowhere to be seen. He chuckled to himself humorlessly as he realized that they probably had forgotten he was there. He barely acknowledged the Dursleys as he helped himself to some eggs and toast.

Harry wolfed down his breakfast and dumped his plate next to the sink before heading back upstairs to his bedroom. Despite the turnaround in his attitude, he was still far from cheery and did not want to spend any more time in the Dursleys' company than was strictly necessary. Harry was still plagued with guilt and self-loathing over the events in the Ministry of Magic, but his newfound sense of purpose in life coupled with his excitement at the prospect of seeing

Sirius again gave him something else to focus on, making the pain much more bearable. He no longer felt completely numb to the world.

As Harry settled back into his room he noticed a couple letters that he vaguely remembered receiving sometime during the void that was the last few days of his life. He had been much too preoccupied to pay them any mind at the time, but now that Harry was in better control of his mental faculties, he decided he should give them a read. He picked up the first one and immediately recognized Ron's untidy scrawl.

Hey mate,

How are you, Harry? Those muggles aren't treating you bad, are they? If Moody can't scare them straight, I don't think anything will. Mum's already on Dumbledore's case about getting you out of there, but he insists that you've gotta stay awhile longer. I never did get why you have to keep going back.

Ginny was bugging me about letting Pig bring you a letter with mine, but I told her to bugger off for a bit since I know you won't be in much a mood to talk to anyone right away. I got an owl from Hermione earlier, and she's in a right state worrying over you. I told her to lay off you for a while since I know how pushy she can be when she wants you to talk about something. I'm sure the opportunity to thank me by saving me from one of her usual tirades will come up soon enough. Mental, that one is.

I'll keep bugging Mum to get Dumbledore to let you out of there. Don't let the muggles get you down.

Ron

Harry shook his head in frustration as he crumpled up Ron's letter and pitched it in the trash. He hated when people walked on eggshells around him, as if he was fragile and unable to take care of himself. And to blatantly point it out the way Ron was doing...it was just utterly ridiculous. He resolved to write a letter to Ginny to thank her for thinking of him before he wrote back to Ron. Maybe then Ron would get the hint that he didn't need another minder. 'Then again, I

wouldn't count on it.' Harry thought. 'Thick, that one is.' If he was in a better mood he might've laughed at his own joke; instead, he picked up the next letter to find Hermione's neat script covering the parchment.

Dear Harry,

How are you? And don't you dare even think of writing back saying "I'm fine." Have you been eating regularly and sleeping alright? You know Mrs. Weasley will make a fuss over you if you come back looking like you haven't had a decent meal in weeks.

I can only imagine how dreadful you must be feeling after all that's happened. I know you don't much want to talk about it, but please don't shut me out or push me away like you usually do. I'm just worried about you, and I want to help. And talking about it can help.

I'm hanging in there, but I think my parents can tell that something is wrong. I've been sugar coating things (a horrible thing to do to a pair of dentists) for them over the years because I was afraid they would pull me out of Hogwarts if they knew the truth of what was happening in our world and the kinds of danger we've been in. I fear the time has come for me to come clean. I only hope they are not too upset with me.

Please write back soon, Harry. I'd really like to hear from you.

Love, from

Hermione

Typical Hermione letter overall, always trying to get people to talk about their feelings. He actually didn't mind it as much as he usually might have. At least she wasn't tiptoeing around him or trying to shield and coddle him. Of course, if Harry had read the letter just the day before he most likely would have scowled and tossed the letter aside, but running away from the pain didn't seem quite so important now. He had to face it and move past it if he was ever going to be any help in this war.

What really surprised Harry about the letter was Hermione's admission that she had lied to her parents. 'Maybe Ron and I have rubbed off on her more than we thought,' Harry pondered. She was the queen of rules and following authority to the letter. She must have been seriously scared of being pulled out of Hogwarts to have lied to her parents about it.

Before Harry began crafting any letters of his own he searched through his trunk for his potions supplies. Sirius had told him the ingredients and instructions for the animagus potion the night before, and they had decided that Harry should ask his friends to get the additional ingredients he'd need. He was unable to go himself, lest his safety be compromised. The Order was surely keeping tabs on him, monitoring his whereabouts, and asking an Order member could arouse suspicion if they recognized what the supplies could be for or questioned his motives. Harry would just tell his friends he was studying this summer and wanted to be extra prepared for Snape's NEWT class, as he'd need to do well in that class to become an auror. That was of course assuming that he even made it into Snape's NEWT class in the first place.

Harry quickly compiled a list of what he'd need to make the potion and decided to ask Ginny for her help. He didn't want to risk asking Hermione for two reasons: 1) She was just too clever for her own good, and 2) her parents were muggles, meaning she didn't have easy access to Diagon Alley. So with that set Harry pulled out quill and parchment and began to write.

The Weasley's had just finished dinner that evening, and Ginny ascended the stairs to her bedroom. She was not having a very pleasant summer thus far. She had lost a man who, while she had only met him just a year ago (and prior to that thought him to be an escaped lunatic murderer), had quickly turned into a favorite uncle-like figure. He was an adult, technically speaking, but he was so full of life and mischief that it was hard not to see him as a friend first and an adult second.

She knew that her feelings of loss were nothing compared to Harry's. Sirius had been the closest thing to a father that he'd ever known. Harry had been in such bad shape when they parted ways several

days ago. He had almost seemed devoid of all emotion. Only his eyes betrayed the true depth of his pain. She knew this had to be weighing heavily on him, and he was probably blaming himself for the whole thing, the noble git. Not that she could really blame him for it; hadn't she, after the incident with the Chamber of Secrets her first year, done the exact same thing? She had been manipulated by Tom Riddle, otherwise known as Voldemort, same as Harry.

Her brother, Ron, who also happened to be a complete git although for entirely different and much less flattering reasons, was not helping matters at all either. Ever since she'd mentioned she was seeing Dean Thomas on the train ride home he had not shut up about the subject. After living with the guy at school for five years without any problems, all of a sudden Dean Thomas is a right prat completely unworthy of me. Right! And to top it all off, he had refused to send her letter to Harry with his, claiming that Harry needed his space right now and didn't need to listen to another girl go on and on about feelings and emotions. 'If he keeps this up Ron'll be having a big prank coming his way before long,' Ginny thought while grinning ruefully.

Just as she started to contemplate the different ways she could exact her revenge on her dear brother, she was pulled out of her thoughts by a tap-tap-tap coming from her window. She jumped two feet into the air, startled out of her reverie. As she glanced over, she saw something she had not been expecting: a beautiful snowy white owl with a letter trying to get in her window. She unlatched the window and opened it up. "Hedwig? You know Ron's room is on the top floor. Why...?"

She was interrupted by an indignant hoot from the owl in question. Hedwig held her leg out impatiently while glaring at the red-haired female who dared to question her ability to deliver a letter to its correct recipient. She did not deliver to the wrong person, and she delivered her mail with dignity, unlike another owl she had the displeasure of knowing that belonged to a different red-haired somebody.

Sufficiently cowed by Hedwig's response to her questioning, Ginny shrugged and took the proffered letter. She scrounged up a bowl and

filled it with water offering it to the owl as a peace offering. While Hedwig hooted gratefully and helped herself to a drink, Ginny looked down at the envelope in her hands and sure enough, the envelope had her name on it. The first thing she noticed as she held the envelope was its weight and clunkiness. She ripped it open to find several gold coins contained within along with two pieces of parchment, one full sized, the other a torn scrap. 'Now that's odd,' Ginny thought to herself before pulling out the full sized letter and beginning to read.

Dear Ginny,

I'm not exactly sure where to start as I've never written you before, but I suppose the beginning is as good a place as any. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for a lot of things, actually. I'm sorry for not noticing you and getting to know you sooner. I realized over the past year what a great person you are, and I'd feel lucky to be able to count you as a friend.

I'm sorry for forgetting about your run in with Voldemort. After you brought it to my attention over the Christmas holidays, I realized that I never once asked you how you were handling it and to make sure you were doing okay. I was a bloody git. Can you forgive me? I'm also sorry for leading you into that trap at the ministry. I appreciate your help and willingness to come that night. Without you and the others, there probably wouldn't have been anything left for the Order to save by the time they arrived.

I just got around to reading the letter I received from Ron. He mentioned that you had wanted to send me a letter and that he'd refused to send it with his. The prat was acting like he had done me a favor. I haven't written Ron back yet. The last thing I need right now is another minder or someone who is going to tiptoe around me. Instead, I decided to write to you. I don't want to think of you as an acquaintance, or my best friend's little sister, but as a friend in your own right. That is if you'll have me.

Now that that's over with, how are you doing? Is your ankle alright? I don't really know how you've been affected by Sirius's passing. Did you really know him well? I know you guys were all at Headquarters before I ever made it there, so I don't know how well you got to know

him or if you even liked him. Plus I was probably a little too caught up in myself to notice much of what was going on around me anyway.

God, I miss him. I just can't help thinking to myself, if only I hadn't been so stupid, maybe he'd still be here now. Maybe I'd be writing him a letter complaining about being stuck here, but now being stuck here doesn't seem so bad in comparison. I was in pretty bad shape for a while. I wasn't able to eat, and I barely left my room. I'm starting to feel a little better though. I made a promise to myself last night to take control of my life and not make a mistake like that ever again, and I woke up this morning feeling like some of the weight had been lifted off me. It still hurts, but now it seems bearable. That's all I can really ask for at this point.

I'm sorry for rambling on so much. Here you probably hate my guts for almost getting you killed and I'm talking your ears off with my problems. I hope this letter finds you well and that you can find it in your heart to forgive me for everything. I'd like it if we could write to each other this summer. I'd like to get to know you better. I asked Hedwig to wait around for you, in case you wanted to reply. If you don't want to write, I'll understand. Just send Hedwig on her way.

Take care,

Harry

P.S. I almost forgot. The galleons are for potions supplies. I was hoping you could talk your mum into picking some things up from the apothecary for me, since I can't exactly go into Diagon Alley myself. I've decided to occupy myself with my studies over break for lack of anything else to do, and potions is taking a priority as I've got to be ready for Snape's NEWT class (assuming I make it in). I'll need to do well if I want to be an auror. I wasn't sure how much it would cost, so tell your mum I can send more if need be. There's a list of what I need in the envelope. Thanks, Gin. You're the best.

Ginny was speechless. What was that? He'd just said more in that one letter than he had probably ever said to her in the past five years since she'd first met him. He had just practically begged her to be his

friend. She had thought he'd never see her for anything other than Ron's little sister.

It had been the world's worst kept secret that Ginny had a huge crush on Harry Potter when she was younger, and she could now admit to it without that familiar blush creeping up from her cheeks to her ears. She had spent years hoping Harry would finally notice her, realize he was madly in love with her, and whisk her away on his noble white steed... Okay, so that's not exactly what she had been hoping for, but looking back on it now, she knew she was waiting on a fairy tale. Only fairy tales aren't real. How could she expect Harry to notice her when she couldn't utter a single coherent sentence in his presence? Hell, she had trouble just getting out any sounds that could pass for human speech. She had realized during her third year just how silly she was being. If she couldn't hold a conversation with Harry, she would never be anything to him.

The first step was to drop her fairy tale. She gave up hoping for her fairy tale romance with Harry. She still cared for Harry, as most people who came to know him did. After Harry came out of the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament at the end of her third year looking so broken and lost, she resolved that she would help Harry in any way that she could. She would be his friend. She wasn't holding out on some romantic fantasy of being the shoulder Harry cried on and the one who gave him comfort in his darkest hours. No, she was done with that silliness.

Harry needed his friends and family – and from what she knew of his family, they were bound to be of no help whatsoever – to be there for him, to support him, and to help him shoulder his burdens. It tore at her heart that night in the Hospital Wing, watching Harry sob into her mother's embrace. At first, when her mother had wrapped her arms around him, he had stiffened as if unsure what was going on, as if he had never been held like that before. It wasn't until later that she realized how true that thought was. She had heard Ron talking in the past about Harry's relatives, but it never really hit her until later that night what he was really saying.

She had been proud of herself that summer at Grimmauld Place. When Harry had finally arrived to spend the summer with them, she

had not turned into the silly little lovesick fan girl she always used to become around him. She hadn't let his appearance change her at all. She acted like her usual self all throughout the summer. She had not said much directly to Harry, but the point was that she was now capable of talking to Harry. And she had no trouble talking to others even in his presence. Sadly enough, this was a remarkable improvement.

Things had remained stagnant as school began, at least in regards to Harry. She was a year behind him, so they had no classes together. Eventually the DA started, so she got to see him a bit more. In addition, over the winter holidays Harry had witnessed the snake attack on her father through his connection with Voldemort. He had been afraid that he might have been possessed by Voldemort and tried to withdraw from everyone. When they confronted him about it, she had been the one to pull him out. He had claimed they wouldn't understand, but she understood all too well what it was like to be possessed by Voldemort. When she brought up the diary from her first year, Harry had immediately realized his misjudgment and had quickly retracted his attitude. Finally, Ginny had felt like she had done something useful for a change. She had finally helped Harry.

During the next term, she helped concoct the plan to allow Harry to speak to Sirius and at the end of term went with Harry into the Ministry of Magic to rescue Sirius. Harry had tried to talk her and the others out of coming, but she had adamantly stood her ground. He just had to learn that he couldn't do everything on his own. Ginny had always been jealous of the adventures that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had shared over the years. She had romanticized them in her mind, thinking them wonderful and fun and exciting. After that night, those thoughts were immediately dispelled.

Their adventure was anything but wonderful, fun and exciting. It was at times cold, uncomfortable, terrifying, painful, seemingly helpless, frantic...no, nothing like she had imagined it to be. Nevertheless, she would have gone again in a heartbeat. It was just right. It was her chance to help Harry and to fight Voldemort.

That brings us back to the present. Ginny had read through Harry's letter again in between her musings, and she still could not quite

fathom the letter she held in her hands. This just didn't seem anything like the Harry she had gotten to know over the past year. And it definitely wasn't the broken, vacant Harry she had just left a little over a week ago. Harry was notorious for being closed up about his feelings, but he had been so open with her. The letter had a serious tone to it, but it wasn't a depressing one. He wasn't joking around and laughing, but she hardly expected him to be doing anything of that sort at this point of time. To top it all off, though, he had seemed genuinely concerned about her and her acceptance of him.

Ginny was utterly confused. For a moment she considered the possibility that he had simply sent similar messages to all of those who had gone to the ministry with him to get it out of the way and avoid our questions and nagging. But that didn't quite add up. For one, Harry had specifically stated that he had yet to write Ron, and he had said that he only just got around to reading letters today, so there's no way Hedwig could have made many deliveries before her. Plus she was still sitting in her room waiting to see if Ginny was going to reply. There was no way around it. She was the one he had chosen to write to. He could have at most sent out only one other letter beforehand.

As she was watching Hedwig, the owl hooted at her questioningly. "Oh!" Ginny jumped as she quickly withdrew from her thoughts. "You're wondering whether or not I'm gonna write back, aren't you?" At Hedwig's nod, Ginny remarked, "Well aren't you the clever one? I'll try not to keep you waiting too long." And with that Ginny withdrew a roll of parchment and a quill and ink bottle from her desk and sat down to write.

As Ginny finished off the last sentence of her letter to Harry, she wondered how she should sign it. Normally she'd sign it "With love, Ginny" but with her history with Harry, she briefly considered choosing a safer tag like "Your friend." In the end, she decided that she really shouldn't even have to think about it. Harry was a friend now, so she'd sign it as she would sign a letter to any one of her friends.

With that done Ginny rolled up the parchment and crossed the room to where Hedwig was perched at the head of her bed. Ginny tied the

note to Hedwig's leg and held out her arm for the owl to jump on. She crossed the room to the window and was just opening it up as her door flew open and Ron's loud voice filtered in "Ginny, what have you been – Where did that owl come from?" Ron asked as Hedwig launched herself out the window.

"It just so happens, Ron, that a friend sent me a letter, and I was just sending a reply back," Ginny replied coldly as she slammed her window shut. As happy as she had been to hear from Harry, her earlier anger directed at her dear brother was not forgotten.

"Well it couldn't have been Dean. I know for a fact that Dean doesn't have a white owl. Come to think of it," Ron pondered aloud as he leaned against the wall in her doorway, "the only person I've seen at Hogwarts ever using a white owl is Harry..."

"Yes, well I've got to go ask Mum for something." Ginny left Ron's unasked question unanswered as she grabbed the potions list and galleons that Harry had sent and marched past Ron out the door and down the stairs leaving her brother standing in the doorway still trying to figure out what was going on.

She found her mum sitting in the living room, knitting needles fervently working beside her as she paged through the latest issue of Witch Weekly. Her dad was on the couch next to her mum looking at what Ginny could only assume was a muggle object of some sort. "Mum, Harry sent me a letter and wanted to know if you could pick up these things for him from the apothecary," Ginny explained, handing over the list and galleons. "He said he wants to be ready for Snape this year; he's pretty hopeful about getting into his NEWT class, I guess. He said he could send more money if it ends up costing more than what he sent."

"Since when did Harry start writing to you?" Ron questioned venomously from the bottom of the stairs where he'd obviously been eavesdropping.

Hoping to head off a row before one started, Mrs. Weasley quickly interjected, "Of course, dear. I needed to run out to Diagon Alley this

week any way. Shall I have the apothecary owl these to Harry? Or were you planning on sending them to him?"

Distracted from Ron's scathing gaze, Ginny turned back and responded to her mum, "If what he sent will cover the cost for delivery, then sure; otherwise I'll just send them back with Hedwig the next time Harry sends her here."

Ginny turned back towards the stairs to find Ron scowling in her direction. She flipped her hair back and strode up the stairs decidedly ignoring her brother. As she entered her room and sent the door closed, it immediately flew back open as Ron once again entered her doorway uninvited.

"Well?" He demanded loudly.

"Well what?" Ginny asked innocently as she turned to face him, twirling a tendril of her hair around her finger..

"You know exactly what!" Ron exclaimed, throwing his arms above his head. "Since when are you getting owls from Harry?"

"You know very well that I have never got an owl from Harry before, you great prat. Harry wrote me a letter today, and I sent him one back. It's something that friends often do when they spend time apart. And if you weren't such a git, he probably would have written to you instead, so don't go taking your anger out on me." Ginny replied as calmly as she could manage. She turned her back to Ron and strode to her windowsill, where she gazed out at the starry night sky.

Ron sputtered for a moment before biting back. "And just what the bloody hell is that supposed to mean? I'm Harry's best friend. Hedwig probably just couldn't find me, so she dropped off that list of potions Harry needed with you instead," Ron worked out logically.

"Oh, brilliant deduction Ron" Ginny managed through a laugh as she spun around to face him again, "except for the part where my name was on the envelope, not to mention the nice long letter that, sure enough, started with the words: 'Dear Ginny.'"

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Ron maintained. “Harry will still be depressed after what happened...won’t talk to anyone for a good week I imagine. I expect he hasn’t even read the letters we’ve sent him yet. It’s the reason I didn’t want to include your letter with my post. I figured we’d wait until I heard back from him before giving the okay for anyone else to write to him. So why would he just up and write to you...and not even respond to my letter?”

“Well you seem to have vastly underestimated your ‘best friend,’ and you’ll find that he doesn’t appreciate your presumptiveness. He didn’t seem terribly pleased with the letter you sent to him from the sound of it.” Ginny replied casually, starting to enjoy the conversation. After being in a similar situation the past few years, having to hear everything about Harry secondhand, it felt good to be in Ron’s shoes and he in hers for once.

Ron looked thoroughly confused at this point. He scratched his head for a moment trying to work out that little twist of fate before asking, “What do you mean?”

Ginny thought about whether or not she should reply. Would Harry want her telling Ron what he’d said in his letter? Well, he had sounded like he’d wanted to send a message to Ron, and knowing how thick Ron could be, Ginny figured he’d never put two and two together on his own. She didn’t think Harry would mind too much at any rate. “Oh just something he mentioned about not needing another minder and how he hates it when people constantly tiptoe around him,” Ginny finally replied.

Ron’s mouth opened and closed a few times reminding Ginny of a goldfish. He looked as though he was trying to come up with a reply, but in the end he just shook his head and walked somewhat dejectedly out of her room.

Ginny changed into her night gown and decided to curl up with a book in bed. It had been quite an interesting day, to say the least. She doubted she’d be able to sleep any time soon even if she tried. There was just too much to think about. She didn’t end up getting much reading done, nor did she fall asleep any time soon.

That night found Harry lying in bed unable to relax. He doubted he'd be able to sleep a wink. He was nervous. That morning he'd woken up refreshed and confident, but now he was worried that it had all just been a crazy dream. He wasn't even sure he'd see Sirius again tonight. He didn't even know if it was possible for something like that to happen. Maybe it had all been his imagination playing tricks on him. He had no idea what the rules were for this sort of thing.

Harry was also anxious for Hedwig's return. He was surprised with how worried he was about how Ginny would respond to his letter. After he sent it, he had wondered if he'd been too open with her or said too much. He hadn't meant to say so much in his letter, but once he started writing, he couldn't stop. He had felt so lonely the past week since coming back to Privet Drive. It had felt good just to talk to someone and to put himself out in the open. Ginny just happened to be the first person he wrote to, and it had all come out.

It wasn't that he was afraid he couldn't trust Ginny; he just wasn't comfortable sharing that much of himself with other people. She was definitely the last person who would ever go dark, and he couldn't imagine her running around telling everybody what he'd said. He was just worried about what she would think of him now. And he really didn't know her all that well, which made him that much more nervous. He wished he hadn't sent out the letter so quickly. He could have rewritten it, made it less personal.

He really hoped she didn't resent him for almost getting her killed or for completely neglecting her after the Chamber of Secrets. He could use all the friends he could get at this point, especially one who could understand what it was like to have a connection with Voldemort, to have him in your head. He still couldn't believe he'd forgotten about her run-in with Voldemort during his second year. It must've have been the worst time of her entire life, and he'd put it out of his mind without ever thinking about how she must be coping with it.

Harry realized that he often got caught up in his own problems and would completely forget or ignore others' issues. Granted his problems were often much more serious than the average person's, but that was no excuse to become entirely self-involved. He would just have to work on that and hope his friends could forgive him.

Harry resolved to write to Neville and Luna as soon as he'd written to Ron and Hermione. He owed them all his sincere thanks and an apology. He'd led them all into danger, but without them there, he most likely wouldn't have made it out of the ministry alive. Harry was glad he'd begun teaching the DA last year. Without the extra training, they would have been dead meat against those death eaters.

He decided he would speak to Dumbledore to see if he could continue with the DA as a school sanctioned club. With the training he'd be getting from Sirius this summer (that is assuming that he wasn't just letting his imagination run away with him, Harry reminded himself), he should still have plenty to teach his classmates.

He had spent the rest of his day going through some of his text books from the past couple years at Hogwarts. If he was learning during the day and practicing at night, then his training should hopefully go pretty smoothly. He also found himself going through the books he'd been given for this past Christmas that were meant to help him out with his DA lessons. Those were by far his favorite books of the lot.

Harry turned back to look at his clock to find that it was well past midnight already. He glanced out his window and could just make out a white speck in the distance, barely discernible in the darkness. He jumped up with a start and greeted Hedwig a minute later when she entered through his window. "There you are, girl. I've been wondering when you'd make it back." Hedwig gave him a reproachful hoot, so he quickly amended himself. "I didn't mean it like that, I was just anxious for you to get back because I couldn't sleep." This seemed to placate the owl, for she stuck out her leg and allowed Harry to untie the parchment that was attached.

Harry quickly unrolled the parchment, grateful for something to occupy his restless mind and began reading.

Dear Harry,

To say that I was surprised to hear from you would be quite an understatement. It was a pleasant surprise though. I know how much you hate to hear it, but I was worried about you, along with everybody

else, I'm sure. I was quite pleased to find that you are doing better. Time seems to be the only remedy for some wounds, and the fact that you've already begun to recover is certainly promising. I don't imagine you'll ever completely heal, but eventually you'll come to the point where you can think about him and smile, remembering all the good things about him.

As for your apologies, I accept equal responsibility for you not getting to know me better before now, so there is no need to apologize. If anything, I should offer you my apologies for acting like a silly little fan girl; I imagine I probably made you incredibly uncomfortable. And I hardly expect you to have been able to get to know me at the time as all I was capable of doing in your presence was squeaking and stammering and running for cover. But I promise I'm beyond that now. My elbows have been butter dish free for almost four years now.

I forgive you for forgetting about my previous encounter with Voldemort through the diary. I won't lie to you and say that it didn't sting that you had forgotten, but you had a lot on your mind at the time. As for your apology for leading us all into a trap, I will not accept it. That's not because I blame you in any way, but because you aren't at fault. You were tricked, plain and simple. I would have done the same thing in your situation, and if a similar situation arises in the future, I'll be right there beside you again. Plus I know first hand how tricky and manipulative he can be, and if you want to blame yourself for this, then you'll have to blame me for being fooled by the diary.

I miss Sirius as well. I didn't know him very long, but last summer he became like a favorite uncle to me. He always had this spirit to him that set him apart from other grown-ups. It's sad to think how he spent the last fourteen years of his life either in prison or in hiding, but I know he wouldn't have traded the last two years getting to know you for anything. He adored you and talked about you all the time. He always wanted to hear stories of your various adventures. However, I take comfort in the fact that he's probably causing a world of mischief with your father in the afterlife. I'm sure he's happy to see your parents again.

I'm glad you agree that Ron is being a prat right now as he has been almost unbearable this summer. He has not shut up about how much

of a git he thinks Dean Thomas is ever since the train ride home. I've never heard Ron say one bad thing about him these past five years, yet I bring him up once and all of a sudden he's a Death Eater in training in Ron's eyes. I swear I think he just does it because he can't get a girl.

I'd love nothing more than if we became good friends. I can't believe you even felt you had to ask. I will always be there for you whenever you should need me. And one thing you never need to apologize for is opening up to me or talking too much. I'll always be here to listen to whatever you have to say. After all, that's what friends are for, right?

As for your potions project (which I don't believe for one second has anything to do with studying for the NEWT potions class, but you don't have to tell me what it's actually for if you don't want to), I'll have mum pick them up for you. I know she was planning to go into Diagon Alley soon anyway. We'll probably have them in a few days. Write again soon.

With love,

Ginny

Harry finished the letter with relief etched across his face. She didn't blame him, and she had made a good point too. He had never once thought to blame her for what happened with the diary and in the Chamber of Secrets. He wasn't ready to just drop his guilt like that, but it was definitely some food for thought. And maybe, just maybe, none of the others would blame him either.

She had seen right through his excuse for the potions ingredients, yet she didn't press him for answers. Ron or Hermione would have demanded to know what they were for, but Ginny had helped him out without asking for anything in return. She had respected his privacy. That was just what he needed right now, Harry thought: a friend who would be there to help and to listen when he was ready who wouldn't pressure him for more than he was willing to give at the time and a friend who could relate to some of what he was going through with his connection to Voldemort. Maybe Ginny could fill that need. It was with that comforting thought that he finally began to drift off to sleep.

Harry's fears turned out to be completely unfounded as his godfather appeared before him. "Bloody hell, Harry. I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever go to sleep," Sirius greeted him with a smile.

"Sorry, I couldn't seem to settle down," Harry replied distractedly as he took in his surroundings. He was in what appeared to be a small classroom, obviously in preparation for his training with Sirius. The room looked like an average Hogwarts classroom, only smaller. He idly wondered whether the room was created by Sirius or his own subconscious.

"Busy day?" Sirius questioned.

"I don't know if I'd call it busy, but definitely thought provoking. You left me with a lot to consider, and as it got later I got nervous that it had all just been a dream and that I wouldn't ever get the chance to see you again," Harry explained, eyes beginning to shine as his emotions caught up with him.

"Understandable. I had trouble believing it myself, but I'm here, and I'm real, and I plan on visiting you for as long as I can. So no worries there, eh kiddo?"

"I was just afraid of losing you all over again."

"I know, Harry," Sirius said as he put his arm around his godson's shoulder. "Eventually I will move on to the next life completely, and I won't be able to visit anymore, but we should have quite a bit of time before that happens. Plenty of time to say goodbye and to get used to the fact. Now what's the story with that potion?"

Harry took a moment to collect himself before responding. "I needed some ingredients, so I've asked Mrs. Weasley to pick them up from Diagon Alley for me. Ginny thinks she'll have them within a few days."

Sirius smirked cockily and raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Ginny, huh? Not your usual Weasley correspondent, is she? What happened there? You and Ron get in a row, or did you just finally come to your senses with the female Weasley?" Sirius asked suggestively.

“Ginny and I are just friends.”

“I always did think you were a bit dense when it came to her,” his godfather continued as if Harry hadn’t spoken. “I was always a bit partial to her myself. Had a bit of the old marauder spirit in her, she did. Not like the twins, who are much too boisterous. She has that same mischievous nature, but she’s sly about it. The twins are all bang and pop, but she’s got finesse like a true marauder. And since you’re doomed to end up with a redhead anyway, might as well make it one as cute as Ginny.”

“Wait, what?” Harry asked thickly. “What do you mean doomed to end up with a redhead?” He scratched his head trying to figure out where the hell this conversation came from and where it was going.

Sirius let out a hearty laugh and ruffled Harry’s hair playfully. “The Potter curse, or blessing as James liked to call it. Apparently every Potter male is doomed to fall helplessly in love with and marry a redhead. James called it his blessing because he knew right away that Lily was the one for him. He never even looked at another girl at Hogwarts. So there’s really no use fighting it, Harry. Might as well just go ring shopping now. Maybe I’ll have myself a goddaughter-in-law soon enough.”

“I haven’t exactly got the time or the energy to even think about girls right now. And my only experience hasn’t left me itching to get back out there right away. Ron was being a prat, so I decided to write Ginny instead. I was planning on writing her anyway, as well as Luna and Neville. I just sped up my plans a bit, alright?” Harry retorted.

“If you say so, Harry” Sirius teased.

Harry was not in the mood for his godfather’s games so he quickly changed the subject. “There was one question that I had.” At Sirius’ nod Harry continued. “How am I going to be able to transform into an animagus without being caught for doing underage magic by the ministry?”

“Elementary, my dear Harry. You don’t use your wand to transform.”

“But I don’t understand. What does the wand have to do with it?”

“It has everything to do with it. Whenever an underage witch or wizard purchases a wand, a monitoring charm is placed on it, which is how they keep track of the underage magic users. After you’ve turned 17, the charm is removed from your wand.”

“But then how do they monitor accidental magic? And how come in the summer before my second year I got in trouble for a hover charm that Dobby performed?”

“Dobby?” Sirius asked.

“House elf – long story,” Harry replied impatiently.

“Alright,” Sirius relented. “Accidental magic alerts different sensors because of the strength of emotions and the resulting magical surge that is the result. Accidental magic generally only occurs with younger children because the older you are the more control you have over your magic and your emotions. The sensors only pick it up when there is, for lack of a better word, an explosion of magic. As for Dobby, he must have either used your wand for the charm or found some way to imitate your wand’s signature.”

“So if I were to learn wandless magic I could perform magic all I want, whenever I want, without repercussions?” Harry wondered aloud.

“That’s right, although you’d probably have better luck trying to break the tracking charm on your wand or stealing a spare wand. Most adults would have trouble casting a simple lumos or wingardium leviosa wandlessly even after years of training. Very few are capable of becoming in any way proficient in that branch of magic,” Sirius explained to Harry

Harry eyes lit up as he remembered a time when he had cast a spell without his wand. “Last summer, when I was attacked by those dementors, I had dropped my wand because Dudley punched me. It was dark, and I couldn’t find it, so I just blurted out ‘lumos’ and my wand lit up,” Harry rushed out.

“That’s amazing!” Sirius exclaimed. “How come you never told anyone about this?”

Harry paused to consider that for a second. “I didn’t think anything of it at the time. Besides, I was much more worried about finding dementors in Little Whinging and the subsequent trial than about my wandless abilities. By the time the trial was over I had completely forgotten about it.”

Sirius held his hand to his chin. “I guess I see your point. You did have a lot going on at the time. But we must see if we can develop your wandless abilities. Tomorrow I want you to practice some simple spells without a wand and see what kind of success you have. Then tomorrow night we can analyze what you can do and try to gauge your potential. If you do have some skill with it, the animagus transformation might come easily to you. The hardest part of the process is learning how to channel your magic within yourself to make the change rather than the usual way of casting spells with your wand.”

“How long do you think it’ll take me to become an animagus?” Harry asked. “Didn’t it take you and my dad a couple years?”

“It did, but you have to remember that we had no instructor. And we didn’t have any resources readily available to us. We had to sneak into the Restricted Section of the library and search for all the information we could get. That at least doubled our total time, if not more.”

Sirius paused and decided to get back onto the task at hand. “Now there isn’t anything we can do about your animagus until you get that potion, so what say we have a couple practice duels tonight? I want to get a feel for what you’re capable of. I’m not sure if everything will work the same for us here as in the real world. I tried doing a couple simple spells, and they seemed to behave normally. So first off just try a couple spells to make sure you can perform them okay, then we’ll get started.”

Harry pulled out his wand, which was stuck in his back packet, and did a few simple charms to test his magic. Everything appeared to be normal, so he turned to Sirius and nodded. Then they squared off.

It was clear that Sirius was the more experienced dueler, but Harry was no push over. A lot of novice duelers enter with the frame of mind that you'll trade hexes. I get one shot, you get one shot, repeat. Harry seemed to start off this way as well, but quickly learned that Sirius was not going to play that way. He would need to work on his spell casting speed, Sirius noted. Sirius made mental tallies of all his observations of Harry. His spell vocabulary was rather limited. He was agile and frequently relied on that to dodge spells, and he used the environment to his advantage, taking cover when possible and occasionally using a chair or some other object to try to distract or disarm Sirius.

When he was finished with his observations, Sirius called for Harry to stop and approached him. "Well I wouldn't mind having you in a fight, but there's plenty of room for improvement. We'll need to improve your spell knowledge and increase your casting speed for starters."

Not sure how to respond, Harry just shrugged his shoulders and inspected an overturned desk on the side of the room before finally looking up at Sirius expectantly.

"Well I suppose that's enough for tonight. Don't forget to practice wandless magic tomorrow." Sirius ruffled Harry's hair affectionately and added, "I'll see you tomorrow night, Harry." And with that Sirius and the classroom faded out of existence.

Chapter 2: Look Ma', No Wand

The next morning Harry decided to write a letter to Hermione before anything else. He had a lot of letters to write, so it was best to get them started right away. He crawled out of bed and plopped down onto the wobbly chair at his desk. Parchment, quill, and ink were soon on the desk, and Harry began writing.

Dear Hermione,

I'm doing as well as can be expected, which doesn't say very much. I was in rough shape for awhile, but I've been feeling a little better the last couple days. I've started doing some studying. It helps to keep my mind off of things. I'm eating as much as I ever do here now, which should still ensure that Mrs. Weasley will fuss over me next time she sees me anyway.

I hope everything goes alright with you and your parents. You'll have to tell them the truth sooner or later, so maybe now is the right time. Just let them know that you are a part of the Wizarding World now, and it is a part of you. Make them see that pulling you out of Hogwarts won't remove you from danger. It will only take away your tools to fight back and protect yourself. The best thing for you would be to continue to learn so that you can properly defend yourself should the need arise. I'm sure they'll come around. If you need any help or anything or think a letter from me might help, just say the words. I'd offer to come visit to help you talk to them, but I'm more or less trapped here at the moment.

Take care,

Harry

Harry sent Hedwig off with the letter, then turned to the door and walked out. He grabbed a quick breakfast much to his relatives' quiet dismay. The threat Moody and the others had made at the train station was still hanging thickly over their heads, and they were reluctant to openly cause Harry trouble. Instead they just ignored him, which suited Harry just fine.

After making his way back upstairs, Harry took a seat at his desk once again and turned his attention inward. It was time for him to start practicing wandless magic. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to start as he'd only ever been taught how to focus his magic through his wand. No one had ever even told him it was possible to purposely do magic without one.

Harry thought back to the night he was attacked by dementors and tried to figure out what he had done. All he could remember was scrambling around frantically in the darkness and desperately wishing he could just see what he was doing. He needed some light and had just uttered "lumos" without really thinking about it at the moment.

He thought back to the times he had performed accidental magic hoping that it could somehow lead him into what he needed to know to do wandless magic. All the times he had accidentally performed magic he had wanted something to happen, and it just did. It didn't always happen in the way that he would have wanted, but maybe that's just because he didn't have proper control over the magic.

One time he had wanted to get away from Dudley and his gang, and the next thing he knew he was on the roof of the school.

Another time he had wanted his Aunt Marge to shut up and get over her inflated ego. In hindsight, perhaps inflated wasn't the best choice of thoughts since that was exactly what happened to her as a result. She was inflated like a blimp and floated away.

The only difference he could discern was control. When he had cast lumos he had been in control of his magic. He had willed to perform a specific function and had gotten the desired results. The other times he had just willed something to happen to fix the problem without giving a specific solution, and he ended up with sporadic results. So in theory Harry just had to really want something to happen then will it to happen in a specific way without losing control.

With that thought in mind Harry set to work trying to levitate his quill without the aid of a wand.

An hour later and his quill had barely twitched, and it was debatable whether the cause of that was actually Harry's magic, the wind, or whether or not it was just a figment of Harry's imagination. Harry was getting frustrated. He began thinking about all he hoped to accomplish this summer and how much being able to use wandless magic would help. He wished his stupid quill would just get up and move already. And it did.

It shot up into the air and firmly lodged its tip in the ceiling with the feather hanging down. Harry had felt a surge go through him which he could only assume was his magic. He finally got the quill to move, but it wasn't exactly what he was hoping for. He only had minimal control over what had happened. He controlled the spell but not the intensity of it.

Feeling slightly bolstered by his moderate success, Harry concentrated on the quill stuck in his ceiling. He willed it to burrow out of the ceiling and float slowly down to his desk. He could see the quill start to move and feel something stirring inside him. Last time it had been a jolt, quick and powerful. This time it was a slow moving flow inside of him. The quill extricated itself from its prison and floated ever so slowly down to the top of his desk. When the quill had landed, the flow inside of him stopped as well.

Harry turned his attention to a small book on his desk. He focused inside of himself on that feeling of the magic flowing through his body hoping to duplicate it. He willed the book to levitate off the desk. He could feel the magic slowly start to build up inside of him and flow through his body. Moments later the book was lifting itself off of his desk and hovering above it.

Harry tried this on a couple other objects increasing the weight of them as he went. After levitating his bed a couple inches off the floor, then slowly, soundlessly letting it drop back to the ground, he decided that he had levitation down pat. So he decided he would move on to a different spell.

He decided to try a summoning charm next. He once again concentrated on letting his magic build up and start to flow just like it had before, then shifted focus to his quill and willed it to himself. He

felt the magic inside of him shift a bit but struggled to keep it steady so as not to lose control of the spell. As a result the quill alternated between floating in the air and coming towards Harry, seemingly unable to make up its mind.

Harry stopped and let the quill drop to the floor. He picked it up and placed it on the desk again before stepping back and giving it another shot. He felt the same shift in his magic and had to rein it in with the same results on the quill. He paused to think about what was happening. There was obviously something different. It was like he was casting a summoning charm and a hover charm at the same time.

The question was: why is this happening? Was he just having a harder time controlling his magic because this was a more difficult spell? If he were able to stop his magic from struggling with him, would that solve the problem? Harry really wished he had someone he could ask these questions to. He tried a couple more times with the same results and began to grow frustrated. As his frustration increased, he seemed to have even more difficulty with the spell and the quill would often buck in the air or go in the completely opposite direction and shoot around much faster than Harry had willed it to go.

He decided to call it quits for the day before the quill ended up poking his eye out and realized that it was evening already and that he had completely missed lunch. He went downstairs and into the kitchen to find his aunt and uncle sitting down to dinner, Dudley was nowhere to be seen. 'Must be out with the gang' Harry thought to himself. 'Otherwise he'd never miss a meal.'

The Dursleys pointedly ignored Harry as had been the custom so far this summer. As he helped himself to some of the pork roast his aunt had cooked he could feel the waves of tension streaming off of his uncle. It took all of the large man's energy just to hold back the surge of insults begging to be let loose on Harry. But he was obviously able to rein in all of his ill will for he simply glared at his nephew before turning back to his food.

Harry ate quickly and in silence before dumping his plate off in the sink and rushing back upstairs, eager to escape the tension and to return to the comfort of his solitude. Harry spent the rest of his

evening pouring over his old textbooks yet again to learn all that he could from them before finally crawling into bed and letting sleep overcome him.

Dear Ron,

I heard back from Harry today, which I guess is obvious since I asked Hedwig to deliver this. I also got your message earlier. It sounds like he was in bad shape for several days and is just starting to come out of it, which is hardly surprising. I'm guessing that he chose to write Ginny first because it was a safer note to write; he could avoid talking about the more sensitive subjects, and he figured that she wouldn't press him since she doesn't know him as well as us. I wouldn't worry too much about it because I'm sure you'll be hearing from him tomorrow.

I'm so anxious to get our OWL results back. I hope they aren't delayed at all because of everything going on at the ministry right now. I've finished most of the summer reading for the NEWT courses I hope to take. Have you started studying yet? You know that NEWTs are incredibly important, and you can never start preparing too soon. You really can't expect to get any NEWTs with the amount of effort you usually put into studying. You'll need to work extra hard these next two years. I'd be happy to write up a study schedule for you to help keep you on task and up to date.

I have another letter to write and a long overdue conversation with my parents to plan, so I'm going to have to cut this short. At least think about opening a book, and let me know when you hear from Harry.

Love from,

Hermione

Ron's sour mood had initially lightened as he saw the white owl fly into his room to deliver a letter. It was short lived, however, when he saw not Harry's messy handwriting, but the neat script of Hermione Granger on the parchment. It wasn't that he didn't like hearing from Hermione. He was just anxious to hear from his other best friend.

His foul mood only worsened as he finished reading through Hermione's letter. 'Why does she always have to get on my case?' Ron thought bitterly. 'And Harry...what the hell is going on with him? I'm his best mate, and he's written my sister and Hermione already and not me. I had better hear from him soon, or he'll be hearing from me. And who the bloody hell is Hermione writing now? Better not be Vicky again...'

Ron dropped the letter on his desk and walked out of his room. He began descending the stairs as another door opened down the hall on the floor below. Ginny walked out and down the stairs in front of him never noticing her brother's form on the stairs. As Ron continued he noticed that her bedroom door was still open. He could see her desk through the open doorway and noticed some parchment littered across the top. He had tried to get Ginny to show him Harry's letter ever since she had got it.

"He's my best friend, not yours. I have more of a right to know how he's doing than you," Ron spat.

"I think that's for Harry to decide, you self-obsessed, arrogant prat. When he wants to talk to you, he'll send you an owl. If he wants to talk to me and not you, that's his choice and his right, and there's not a thing you can do about it. If you thought less about yourself and more about Harry, he probably would have written to you already. Now for the last time: you are not reading Harry's letter." Ginny fumed, clearly frustrated with her older brother, before shoving him out of her doorway and slamming the door in his face.

'What does she know anyway? After all, like Hermione said, Harry was just writing Ginny because she didn't know him well and wouldn't ask questions about Sirius or make him talk about everything. So why shouldn't I know what he wrote to her?' And with that thought, Ron crept into Ginny's room and began thumbing through the parchment on her desk. He finally found the familiar scrawl of his best friend and immediately noticed the length of the letter which only served to intensify his burning curiosity.

He was just finishing the first paragraph when a red-haired ball of fury erupted from the doorway. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

In the blink of an eye she had crossed the room and snatched the letter from his hands, staring daggers into her brother.

“I was checking how my best friend was doing. What’s he doing writing you a long letter like that? And what was he apologizing for? What the bloody hell did the rest of the letter say?”

“I cannot believe you snuck into my room and read through my mail. You have absolutely no right to read any of my letters whether from Harry or not. Now if you don’t want bat-bogeys covering your face, I suggest you get out of her quickly and never step foot in my room ever again.”

At the words ‘bat-bogeys’ Ron bolted from the room before she could finish the sentence. Ginny had a temper to rival any Weasley, and despite her small size, she was a force not to be reckoned with.

He hurried back to his room more confused than when he had left it. Harry’s letter to Ginny wasn’t just a short one asking for a favor like he had thought. ‘Why would Harry be apologizing to her anyway? And why such a long letter? She’s just my baby sister. But then again maybe he only wrote to her because she was there that night in the Department of Mysteries. Maybe he wrote to Neville and Luna as well to apologize and make friends with the three of them. He had said that he wanted to be friends with Ginny. Well, I’ll just ask Harry what’s going on when he writes me.’

Ron turned back to Hermione’s letter. “She better not be writing to Vicky again.”

Sirius was waiting in that same classroom again as Harry entered into his dreams. “Hiya Harry,” he said jovially.

“Hi Sirius.”

“So...how did the wandless magic go?” Sirius asked.

“Gee, it’s nice to see you too,” Harry replied dryly.

“Ee-gads, a sense of humor,” Sirius smirked, clutching a hand to his chest. “I’m sorry Harry. I’m just anxious to hear how it went. It’s not every day you find a wizard capable of wandless magic. This could be a huge advantage for you. So how was your day, and how did the wandless magic go?”

“My day was fine. I had some success with the wandless magic, but not as much as I had hoped. I managed to control wingardium leviosa pretty well, but when I tried to do a summoning spell afterwards I didn’t get the best results. It felt like my magic was being pulled in two different directions, and I was having trouble controlling it. Then I got frustrated and things started falling apart from there. I’ll have to try again tomorrow.”

“Hmm...wish I knew how to help you. But even having that little success is promising.”

“Yeah...I want to try doing a couple spells with my wand for a little bit. Maybe doing them with a wand and concentrating on the magic will help me get a grasp on things a little bit,” Harry said.

“Fair enough. Have at it.” Sirius took a seat to watch as his godson set off to work.

Harry looked around the room and found some quills on a desk in the room. He pulled out his wand and with a swish and a flick and the words “wingardium leviosa,” the quill was floating in the air. Harry had it hover for a few moments before lowering it back on the desk. He stood there looking pensive for a moment before opening his mouth. “I can feel the magic in me when I concentrate. It felt the same as it did earlier, only it’s slightly different because of the wand. Then it was like the magic was just flowing inside me. Here it’s more focused around the wand in my right arm.”

Harry took a few steps back and performed the summoning charm with a short “Accio.” The quill zoomed from the desk towards him, and he snatched it out of the air with his left hand. He did another levitation charm then another summoning and thought for a minute. “They’re different,” he finally said, nodding to himself. He began to pace lightly as he continued to explain. “I can feel the magic for both,

but it's different. When I was doing wandless magic earlier I was concentrating on the magic and trying to keep it the same, but when I was trying to summon an object I felt my magic trying to change, so I was fighting with it. That's why it couldn't seem to make up its mind, I was trying to summon it with a levitation charm."

Sirius just sat there looking at Harry until he finally asked, "So what does that mean?"

"It means that I need to learn the different ways that magic will feel so I can perform more spells without my wand. It will take some practice, but if I can manage to control my magic and change it to fit my needs, then I should theoretically be able to do any type of magic without a wand," Harry explained.

"That would be amazing," Sirius exclaimed, rising from his seat, "but that's a pretty big if."

"Well, I'll just have to try and see how it goes."

"Sounds like a plan. Now that that's settled what say we get started on tonight's lesson?" Sirius asked. "I thought tonight we would start on the basics of apparation."

"Really? You're gonna teach me how to apparate?"

"I'm gonna try anyway. Hopefully what you learn here will transfer out into the real world. If nothing else we can go over the theory behind it and hope that it's enough when the time comes for you to use it."

Sirius began talking about the basic mechanics of the spell. You had to visualize your destination in your mind and try to be as detailed as possible about the exact location you wish to apparate to. Any indecision or uncertainty or vagueness could lead to splinching. Once you have your destination visualized, it's just a little twist of the wand while focusing on your physical body being at your destination and voila, you've apparated. The spell didn't require a verbal incantation.

"Of course it is much easier to apparate to a place you can see because that pretty much takes care of the visualization step right

there. Places you are very familiar with should be easier for you as well, since it will be easier to visualize your destination with more clarity. Distance also factors into the equation. If you try to apparate too far away it could have disastrous results.” Sirius had entered into a professor mode to explain the subject which was completely unlike his usual mischievous self.

“Now you may be wondering why you’ve never seen anyone pull out their wand to apparate before. They are not doing it wandlessly. The fact of the matter is that it’s easy to perform the wand movement inconspicuously as it only requires just a little twist. Say my wand was tucked into my belt like this,” Sirius commented as he stuffed his wand into his trousers. “I could just put my hand on my hip and twist the wand without ever taking it out.” Sirius finished the last half of the sentence on the other side of the room. “Well I guess apparation works more or less the same here. Why don’t you give it a shot?”

Harry stood up and looked at Sirius questioningly.

Sirius gave him a grin and said, “Just choose a place in this room to apparate to. Focus on the exact spot and lock it in your mind. Then concentrate on being in that spot and give your wand a twist.”

Harry nodded to his godfather then glanced around the room before locking his eyes onto one of the corners. His brow furrowed in concentration as Harry secured the spot in his mind. He pulled out his wand and continued staring at his spot for another moment before giving a twist. There was a loud crack, but Harry was still in the same spot he had been in all along. He looked over to his godfather.

“Not bad for a first try,” Sirius grinned. “You did what’s called flickering. You technically apparated to the exact spot you were in. It usually means that when you actually went to twist you weren’t concentrating on being anywhere else. Give it another shot.”

Harry did as he was told and focused his mind on his corner. When he was satisfied he gave his wand another twist. There was another loud crack, and Harry found himself a foot away from the corner of

the room staring at where the two walls met. He quickly spun around. "I did it!" he exclaimed with a whoop of joy.

"Good. Very good" his godfather commended. "Do that a couple more times to different spots in the room, and then we'll move on."

Harry did as he was told, apparating to several different spots in the room with the same results. After his fifth successful apparation, he turned to his godfather for more instructions.

"Okay, you're doing great. You can apparate to a specific spot without a problem, but now you need to work on your position in that spot," Sirius explained. "You don't want to apparate facing the wall. You want to apparate facing the room. Once you really get the hang of apparation you can try more difficult things like apparating into a sitting position on a chair. But for now, just concentrate on apparating to a spot and facing a certain direction."

Harry nodded to Sirius to show that he understood the instructions before focusing on the task at hand. His eyes moved back to that first corner he had apparated to, and Harry concentrated on being in that spot facing out into the room. He took a minute to really lock it into his mind before giving his wand a twist and willing himself into the new position. Harry had closed his eyes right before giving his wand the twist. After he heard the telltale crack, he slowly opened his eyes and immediately zeroed in on his beaming godfather.

"Excellent Harry," Sirius praised. "Now do it again all around the room."

Harry did as he was instructed. The rest of the training passed in the same manner, with Harry apparating around the room. Sirius had him work on his speed and precision. By the time Sirius was calling the night's lesson to an end, Harry was able to apparate to any spot in the room facing any direction in a matter of a couple seconds.

Harry awoke to find Hedwig perched on the headboard of his bed with a letter waiting for him to claim it. He sat up in his bed and took the parchment. He unfolded it with one hand while stroking Hedwig's feathers with his other. What met him was Hermione's precise script.

Dear Harry,

I hope you don't mind, I asked Hedwig to deliver a note to Ron and then come back to me for my reply. Not having an owl of your own can make keeping in touch quite a hassle in the Wizarding World. I was very pleased to receive your letter. I was very worried about you, but it's quite a relief to hear from you and to know that you're beginning to feel better. Sirius would have wanted you to make the most of your life and to honor his memory by enjoying yourself.

I must say I was pleasantly surprised to hear that you've taken to studying this summer. It's good to see that you're finally taking your schoolwork more seriously. With NEWT classes coming up, these next two years will be the most important of our lives. Our NEWT grades will determine what career paths we will be able to take after Hogwarts. I wouldn't want your future to be limited because you didn't apply yourself in school. I only hope your new attitude will rub off on Ron. If he thinks he can just coast through NEWT classes, he's got another thing coming.

Speaking of Ron, he seems rather upset that you haven't written to him yet. It sounds like he's been giving Ginny a hard time since you wrote to her, and she won't let him read your note to her. You should write to him soon so he can stop worrying. We're only worried about you, Harry. Keep in touch.

Love from,

Hermione

With a sigh Harry decided that he probably should write to Ron soon. He didn't want to cause a row between Ron and Ginny after all. In the meantime, Harry cleaned himself up before heading downstairs to grab a bite to eat. When he returned to his room, Harry was all business. He immediately set to work on his wandless magic.

He began as he did the day before with a simple levitation charm. "Wingardium leviosa" sent many an object hovering above the ground as Harry became proficient in casting this spell wandlessly. Satisfied

with himself, Harry decided to switch to the summoning spell again. Like the day before he concentrated on his magic, letting it flow through him, before concentrating on summoning his quill to him. He felt his magic start to shift again, only this time he didn't fight the change. He went with the flow of his magic and let it change into the form he recognized from last night when he had performed the summoning charm with his wand. His quill flew to him, and he snatched it out of the air with ease.

Encouraged by his success, Harry began summoning different objects to himself. After a couple successful attempts he changed tactics. Up until now he had always willed his magic into the form of the levitation charm first, then let it shift into the summoning spell. He decided to will his magic directly into the summoning charm. He figured that if he was ever going to be proficient with wandless magic, he would need to be able to call forth the correct spell right away. He quickly caught the hang of this and began alternating between levitation and summoning charms calling forth each magic directly.

Harry began trying different spells that he had learned over the years in Charms and Transfiguration. He didn't try any spells learned in Defense Against the Dark Arts as he didn't have an opponent to practice them against. He met a lot of success, but there were a few occasions where he had to struggle to get the appropriate results. After a couple of these occasions, Harry noticed that when he got frustrated his magic became more erratic. He was prone to make more mistakes, and he could feel the magic inside of himself disrupted from its flow.

When he realized this he took time to calm himself down before starting again. From then on he kept a close eye on his magic to make sure that he didn't lose control of it. Any time he began to get frustrated and saw that the flow of his magic was being upset, he would make himself take a few minutes to gain a level head before continuing. By the time he stoppedb nighttime was approachingb and he realized that he had missed lunch yet again.

He ran downstairs to get dinner and realized that his relatives had already eaten. He fixed himself up a quick dinner of macaroni and cheese. As Harry was eating in solitude he thought of the implications

of what he had learned that day. His wandless magic could be a great aid to him in the upcoming war, but he couldn't let his emotions get in his way. If he let himself become frustrated or upset, his magic was likely to become erratic at best which could mean the difference between life and death, and not just for him, but for one of his friends or his classmates, anybody.

Voldemort was out in the open now, and Harry knew that it was only a matter of time before he stepped into the spotlight and the war truly began. He would not be caught unprepared. But what could he do? How could he train himself not to let his emotions get in the way? Who did he know who could help him gain control, who could push him to extremes and force him to become used to remaining cool and collected in the worst of circumstances? Harry could only think of one person who would fit the bill, one person who would push all his buttons relentlessly and never back down. Severus Snape was just the man for the job.

Harry didn't know if he would make it into NEWT potions. He thought he did pretty well on the OWL for it; potions was a lot easier when he didn't have Snape breathing down his neck, ridiculing him every couple minutes. But he wasn't sure if he did well enough to manage an O. Harry decided that it might be a good idea to come up with a backup plan, just in case. Then it came to him: Occlumency. He would ask to resume his Occlumency training. It was something he should probably learn anyway.

As Harry was finishing up his meal, he decided it was time to write his dear old headmaster a note. He wanted to continue with the DA and would need permission to do so, and he would also ask for permission to ask Snape to resume Occlumency training. Harry ran back up to his room and began writing.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I would like to begin by apologizing for my actions in your office a couple weeks ago. I was angry and upset, but I had no right to destroy half of your office. I hope nothing was damaged beyond repair, but if anything was I would be more than willing to pay you

back if I can or to make up for it to you in some way. With that said, on to business.

I have two things I wish to ask you. First of all, I would like your permission to continue with the DA (though a change of name might be in order). I would like for it to be a school sanctioned club, and I would like to continue teaching it. I think it should be open to all students fourth year and above, but there should be some criteria for involvement. Hermione's magical contract was an idea, but I don't think it's enough. I'd like something similar that prevents someone who intends to use any of what I teach for dark purposes from joining the club. It should also prevent members from talking about the club with non-members. If there is any more information that you need about my intentions for the club, please ask away.

My second request is for your permission to restart my Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape. I think it would be most appropriate if I asked him of my own accord, but given how things ended between us last term, I fear he might not be too receptive of the idea. I would like your permission and, if necessary, your assistance in convincing him to resume training me.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Harry rolled up the parchment and strode over to Hedwig's cage where his snowy white owl was perched, waiting expectantly for her next delivery. Harry stroked her feathers before tying off his letter and holding out his arm to the owl. She jumped on with a hoot of appreciation. He headed over to the window and gave Hedwig a boost out the window where she soared out of sight into the darkened sky. Harry settled into his desk to do some more reading before finally heading off to bed.

Harry told his godfather all about his wandless experiences of the day. He told him of his successes and his difficulties and the conclusions he drew about his ability. He told Sirius of his decision to try to learn to control his emotions better and the letter he had written to Dumbledore asking to resume lessons with Snape and to continue

the DA. Sirius had been both shocked and proud at Harry's pronouncement. He had commented on what a mature decision it was to make, to which Harry cryptically replied, "Yes, well I haven't exactly got the time to be a child any longer, have I? Voldemort's not going to wait for me to be ready to face him, so the sooner I'm ready the better."

After the awkward silence that followed his statement, Harry resumed his practicing of apparation. He progressed onto the more complicated aspects his godfather had told him about of apparating into a seated position. As Harry practiced more and more he became more familiar with the feel of that particular magic. On a whim Harry concentrated extra hard on his destination and pulled his magic to him, letting it flow and form into the proper form for apparation. With a pop Harry had managed to apparate without a wand.

As he practiced more and more throughout the night he became more and more comfortable with the process. He realized that he could make minor changes to the magic and was able to slow down his reappearance which had the added affect of vastly reducing the noise he made. Appearing more slowly meant that not as much air was displaced as rapidly. By the end of the night he was barely making a sound, much to Sirius' delight. "Even Dumbledore makes more noise than you, and I'm pretty sure he needs his wand to do it too," his godfather had acclaimed.

Needless to say Harry was rather pleased with the progress he had been making. He was now able to cast spells outside of school during the summer without repercussion, and he was quickly learning how to apparate, something he shouldn't be learning how to do for another full year.

The next morning Hedwig was again waiting for him with another letter. Harry immediately recognized the loopy handwriting as that belonging to his headmaster as he began reading the parchment.

Dear Harry,

I must say I was surprised to hear from you. Do not worry yourself over what transpired in my office nor of any of my possessions. I am only saddened that my poor judgment has cost you so much.

As for your requests, you have my blessing to ask Professor Snape to resume your Occlumency lessons. Should he prove difficult to persuade, I would be more than happy to intercede on your behalf. And might I add that I am quite proud of you for making this decision. It shows a great deal of maturity well beyond your years.

As for your other request, I think it a splendid idea to continue with the DA. If it is to be an official club, I will need to approve all of the details before you commence your instructions. I will need to know your plans for the magical contract you mentioned, and your curriculum will also need to be approved by either me or a professor of my choosing. The last thing to put in order will be your status in regards to your role in the club. You will be in a position of authority in this club, and you will need an official role to reinforce your authority. I will discuss your proposal with the rest of the staff before the start of term, and we will come to a decision on the privileges and responsibilities you will be awarded to coincide with your role.

Again, I feel I must commend you on the maturity you have shown me. I look forward to seeing you at the start of the term.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry tossed the letter aside. He still wasn't happy with his headmaster, but he knew he needed his help. He was pleased to see that the headmaster had no issues with either of his requests and even seemed willing to go out of his way to help out. Being given an official capacity to lead the DA would help him get much more work done especially with any new members.

Before he got too carried away with anything else, Harry decided he would write a letter to Ron.

Dear Ron,

I'm doing okay now. The Dursleys have ignored me for the most part, which is a remarkable improvement.

I heard that you've been giving Ginny a hard time about my letter to her a couple days back. I really wish you wouldn't. I wrote to Ginny because I wanted to and had something to say to her at the time. If you've got a problem with me, please don't take it out on Ginny or anybody else. Just talk to me about it. You also might want to think about leaving her alone about Dean. It's her business who she dates, not yours. I think she's quite capable of taking care of herself.

What have you been up to this summer? I've actually been studying lately for lack of anything else to do. I wish I could practice with a wand over the summer. I don't want my dueling skills to get rusty. Seems kind of foolish for the ministry to be worrying about underage magic with Voldemort running around. But at least they're finally admitting he's actually back.

I'm sorry I didn't write to you sooner, but for several days I wasn't even reading any mail, let alone writing any. Then when I finally came around there were a couple that I wanted to take care of before this one. Don't take it the wrong way. It doesn't mean anything.

Take care,

Harry

As he was signing his name, a strange owl appeared in the window holding a package. Harry cautiously took the package and looked it over. It was from the apothecary in Diagon Alley. Figuring this must be the ingredients he had asked for, Harry tore it open to make sure he had everything he needed. 'That was certainly quick,' he thought to himself as he confirmed that it indeed had everything he needed. He decided that since Hedwig was making a trip to the burrow anyway, he'd write a letter to Ginny to thank her and Mrs. Weasley.

He whipped out a piece of parchment and set to work writing the letter. When he finished, he signed his name and rolled both letters up to give to Hedwig. "You're certainly getting some exercise this

summer, aren't you girl?" Harry asked his owl as he gave her both letters and told her which one went to each person.

After sending Hedwig off, Harry closed his curtains to prevent anyone from seeing into his room and began his training for the day.

The afternoon found Ron and Ginny Weasley in the garden: Ron hurling gnomes out of the garden while Ginny picked berries. It was a hot summer day with the sun beating down on the two fair skinned red heads as they worked.

As Ron flung another gnome over the hedge, he noticed a white speck in the sky coming towards him. He waited as the snowy white owl flew to him and held out her leg with a letter attached. "Looks like Harry sent me a letter," Ron proclaimed loudly to his sister with a smug smile on his face.

After being relieved of her first letter, Hedwig flew over to Ginny and held out her other leg upon which was attached a second letter. "Looks like he wrote to me too," Ginny commented off-handedly. She missed the glare from her brother as she strolled over the shade of a nearby tree to sit and read her letter. Ron, meanwhile, stalked off into the house. Comfortably resting against the trunk of the tree, Ginny delved into Harry's letter.

Dear Ginny,

Thank you so much. I got the supplies from the apothecary today; it came much sooner than I had expected. Make sure you thank your mum for me as well. You're right about this not having anything to do with Snape's class, and I promise I'll tell you what I'm up to (so long as you promise to keep it a secret), but I can't say it in a letter. All I can say is that this summer I am preparing myself for what's to come, and these supplies should help me out a lot.

Hermione mentioned that my last letter to you may have caused some problems between you and Ron. If that's true I want you to know that I'm sorry. I didn't mean for Ron to get mad at you. If he was upset with anyone it should have been me, and he shouldn't have

taken any of that out on you. I told him as much in the letter I sent to him, so hopefully he'll get the message and get off your case.

I also told him that your love life is none of his business. I'm not sure he'll listen to me, but I let him know that you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. How are things going with Dean anyway? To be honest I feel kind of bad because I had completely forgotten you had said you were seeing him now. But I hope all is well with you two. Dean's a decent enough bloke. He should treat you right, and if not he'll have more than an angry brother to answer to.

Thank you for what you said about the correlation to our situations in being tricked by Voldemort. I hadn't thought of it from a different perspective like that. I still can't shake the feeling that I could have avoided the whole mess had I only thought things through, but it has helped make things more bearable. I know that I am not entirely to blame in what happened, but I still feel some responsibility for it.

Believe it or not I actually have been training and studying quite a bit this summer, even a little in potions. But not all of what I'm doing is for classes. I've begun thinking about what I'm going to be doing with the DA next year. Yes, that's right, the DA will continue. I already made it official by asking for Dumbledore's permission, which he gave without hesitation. We might be changing the name though. It will be an official club, open to students 4th year and up. There will be some sort of qualification for membership, a magical contract of some sort to discourage certain unfavorites from joining up. I haven't mentioned any of this to anyone else yet, so I'd appreciate it if you kept your lips sealed on the subject for the time being. I'd like to keep a few tricks up my sleeve.

Well, I hope your summer is going well. Keep busy, stay safe, and write again soon.

Take care,

Harry

Ginny folded up the letter and tucked it into the pocket of her shorts. 'What did he mean he hasn't told anyone else yet? Surely he told

Ron and Hermione about the DA, right? Maybe he just didn't want me telling Dean or any other friends of mine to keep it from spreading to everyone at Hogwarts,' Ginny thought to herself as she strolled into the house. She noticed Hedwig perched in the kitchen and asked "Hedwig, do you mind waiting a bit to take a reply back to Harry?"

Hedwig gave a hoot to show that she would wait, so Ginny ascended the stairs and went to her room to craft her reply to Harry. She pulled Harry's letter out of her pocket and put it into one of the desk drawers that she kept locked. She learned her lesson the hard way when she walked in on Ron reading through the letters she had left lying on her desk the other day. Just as she was dipping her quill in ink to begin writing, her door burst open to reveal a furious looking Ron.

"You just had to go and tell on me to him, didn't you? What, are you trying to turn him against me or something? Is that it? Think maybe then he'll finally notice you?" Ron accused his sister scathingly.

"Just what are you on about now?" Ginny asked in annoyance, turning in her chair to face her brother.

"Well, considering half his letter was spent telling me how I should treat my dear little sister better," Ron snapped, "that can only mean that you've been complaining to him about me. And I want to know why you're trying to turn my best friend against me."

"First of all," Ginny replied icily, "the only thing I said to Harry about you was that you hadn't shut up about Dean Thomas since I mentioned him on the train." Ginny rose from her chair and advanced on her brother. "Secondly, do you really think that I have nothing better to do with my life than to try to ruin yours? Harry seemed mad enough at you without my help, so maybe you should worry a little less about what I am saying about you or not and just grow up." She poked Ron in the chest as she finished, backing him up out of her doorway. Once he had stepped out of the room she slammed the door in his face.

She locked the door and returned to her desk. If she wasn't planning on talking about Ron in her letter to Harry before, she sure as hell

was intending to do so now. He really could be a complete prat sometimes.

Harry had been practicing his wandless magic for a couple hours. He was apprehensive about practicing apparation. Despite his successes in his nighttime training with Sirius, there was always the chance that he would make a mistake, and there wouldn't be anyone around to help him if he ended up splinching himself. So he had avoided apparation practice and stuck to other spells.

At one point he had taken his existing curtains, which were fairly thin and would not block out a lot of light, which some of the spells he would eventually be casting would cause, and used his transfiguration skills to make them into a heavier material that would have no trouble blocking all his spell work from the outside world.

His confidence in his abilities was lifting as he encountered more and more success in wandless casting. He still wasn't up to the standards of his regular magic with a wand, but he was quickly closing the gap. The biggest difference at the moment was the speed of casting. It always took him a moment to gather his magic and form it the right way before he could cast anything. He hoped that as he continued practicing it would become second nature to him, allowing him to gather and form his magic at a moment's notice.

Harry eventually gathered up his nerve and decided to try apparating. He started off very slowly as he had the first time he tried apparating with a wand. He focused on a corner of his room and made sure to completely lock the location in his mind before gathering up his magic and forming it into the apparation spell. Once he was satisfied, he concentrated on being in that corner of the room, facing out towards the room, and willed his magic to take him there. With a pop, Harry reappeared in the desired corner looking out towards the window.

Encouraged by his initial success, Harry continued with his apparation practice, popping up all around the room. He started off slowly but was rapidly building speed as his confidence built up. He eventually started softening the sound of his apparation like he had the night before until there was barely a whisper when he disappeared and reappeared.

Late that night, Harry realized that he was making a habit out of missing meals as his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten lunch or dinner yet. He snuck downstairs into the kitchen to appease his rumbling stomach. When he returned to his room it was to a tapping sound emanating from behind the newly thickened curtains he had made earlier that day. When he drew the curtains aside, he revealed a very annoyed Hedwig wanting entry into the room.

Harry quickly opened the window to let his owl fly in. "Sorry, Hedwig" Harry attempted to placate the owl. "I was downstairs getting something to eat." Still annoyed, Hedwig stuck out her leg for Harry to remove the attached letter. Hedwig immediately flew off once free of her burden. As Harry unrolled the parchment, he found it to contain handwriting he was beginning to become familiar with.

Dear Harry,

I'm sorry to do this to you, but I'm in need of a way to vent some of my frustration with your best friend, my dear brother Ron. So prepare yourself for a rant.

That insufferable prat has a lot of nerve. First he wouldn't leave me alone about Dean. Then he keeps hounding me to let him read the letter that you sent me, claiming that it was his right as your best friend. After I told him to sod off a hundred times I caught him snooping in my room reading through my letters. He found yours and judging by his comments I'd say he managed to get through a paragraph or two before I caught him.

As if that wasn't enough, after getting your letter today he barges into my room and accuses me of trying to turn you against him. He claimed that half your letter was berating him for his treatment of me. I told him that the only thing I had mentioned was that he wouldn't shut up about Dean. And I told him to grow up. I also let him know that you seemed upset enough with him without my help before I had even written to you. If you could tell him who your source was, and I'm assuming it was Hermione since I wrote to her about it earlier, that might get him off my back for a bit, but then again that might just put Hermione in my place.

Now before you start writing me apologies, let me just tell you right now that I don't want to hear any of it. My brother is the prat, not you. That's not to say you've never been a prat, but you didn't do anything wrong this time, and I don't blame you in the slightest for my brother's behavior. If it wasn't this, the immature git would have found some other way to get under my skin. I wanted to say thanks for sticking up for me to Ron. Merlin knows he won't listen to me, but he might just listen to you.

Anyway, you are quite welcome for the potions supplies. And I will hold you to that promise (of course I'll keep it a secret). I'm glad to hear that the DA will be continuing, and legally this time. Am I allowed to talk to Ron and Hermione about it? You said I shouldn't mention it to anyone, but I figured you must be telling at least those two about it, right? I won't bring it up until you give me the okay, but I'm just surprised that you chose me to be the first to know.

Oh, and as for Dean, don't worry about forgetting about him and I. You had a lot on your mind at the time. To be entirely truthful, I probably would have forgotten about it too if not for the git constantly reminding me. Yes, that's right, you heard me correctly. I made the whole thing up just to prove that Ron would throw a fit no matter who I dated. Looks like I was right. Don't tell Ron that, though. Annoying as he is about it, I still get some pleasure out of baiting him with it. Sorry again about the rant, but I needed to say all of that to somebody. Write again soon.

With love,

Ginny

Harry could not believe Ron. 'How dare he read my letter to Ginny without her permission? And how could he accuse his own sister of trying to turn me against him? And the nerve of him to claim that it's his right as my 'best friend' to read letters I send to Ginny. This is a time when we all need to pull together, and he's just starting fights wherever he can.' Harry thought to himself. Ginny had said it best: Ron needed to grow up; otherwise he was going to be left behind. As Harry had told Sirius, he didn't have any time for childishness; he had a prophecy to fulfill.

Harry tucked back into his small collection of books to study before going to bed. It was only an hour later that Harry began to grow bored and tired. He had been through most of these books before, and he was running out of new things to learn from them. He decided to put the books aside for now and write the letters to Neville and Luna that he had been planning on sending. He set to work on Neville's first.

Dear Neville,

I'm not exactly sure how I should start this, but let me first say thank you. Without your help and the others I probably would not have made it out of the ministry alive that night. You showed a lot of courage facing those death eaters. You're a good friend, Neville. I'm sure your parents would be proud of you.

I also want to apologize for leading you into danger needlessly. You came with me to save my godfather knowing that we would likely be facing Voldemort or his death eaters, and I cannot thank you enough for that, but if I had thought things through and been more careful, you wouldn't have had to be in that situation in the first place. For that I am very sorry.

You've proved yourself to be an excellent dueler. Last year in the DA you quickly ascended the ranks and were often one of the first to master a new spell. And I'll be willing to bet that with a new wand especially fitted to you, you'll only get even better. I'd like to offer to pay for a new wand for you, if you'll let me. It was my fault you were there that night, and if it weren't for that you wouldn't need a new wand. It's the least I can do. And if your Gran is mad at you over that incident, I'd be more than happy to send her a letter explaining everything and taking full responsibility for it. I don't want you to get in trouble on my account.

I hope your summer is going well. Let me know what you're up to. I'm stuck with the muggles again, so I've had nothing to do except study to keep me busy. Keep in touch.

Take care,

Harry

One down; one more to go.

Dear Luna,

Let me start off by just saying thank you. You volunteered to come with me to save my godfather knowing the danger involved, and I cannot thank you enough for that. Without your help, along with the others', I probably would not be here today.

I would also like to apologize for leading you into that danger in the first place. Had I stopped to think things through I might have realized that it was just a trap to lure me into danger. Had I not been so stupid, you and the others never would have been put at risk. For that I am sorry.

If there is ever anything you need, I want you to know that you can always ask me. You've got a friend in me. With that said, how is your summer going? Have you and your father started your search for the crumple-horned snorkack yet? I hope you find one. I'm stuck with my muggle relatives right now, so I haven't had anything to do with myself except study. Keep in touch, and let me know how the search goes.

Take care,

Harry

Harry rolled up the two pieces of parchment and turned to Hedwig, who had returned a short time ago to find her cage spotlessly clean and her water bowl freshly filled. She had apparently deemed this an adequate apology, for she didn't give Harry any more trouble. Harry gave each of the letters to her in turn explaining who each letter was meant for. "Have a safe flight," Harry told his owl who hopped onto his shoulder and nipped his ear affectionately before swooping out the window to deliver her post.

He looked at his watch and resolved to study for another half an hour before going to bed. He pulled out the dueling book he had been given last Christmas to help him with the DA and set to work.

Harry took a long time to get to sleep that night because he kept thinking of his newly acquired potions ingredients and the fact that it meant he would soon be well on his way to becoming an animagus. He felt that becoming an animagus would help him feel closer to his father and Sirius, which made the whole thing all the more important to Harry.

When he finally did fall asleep, he found Sirius waiting for him as had become the usual. "How was your day?" his godfather asked him fondly.

"Great!" Harry replied enthusiastically. "I was able to apparate around my room just fine without my wand. I also practiced more wandless magic and am becoming more comfortable with it. It still takes me a few moments to cast my spells, but I think I'm getting a lot better. It's beginning to feel a bit more natural. I also got a package from the apothecary today. It's got everything I need to make the animagus potion."

"That's great. I guess that means we should go over the steps for brewing the potion tonight. You'll have to memorize each step carefully and remember all of the details because you won't be able to write it down here to take with you. It's times like these that will make you wish pensieves were a little more commonplace," said Sirius.

"I'll do my best to remember all the instructions. Hopefully without Snape breathing down my neck the brewing will go smoothly. I tell you, I was amazed at the difference when I was taking my Potions OWL," Harry remarked.

"Don't be worrying about Snape right now. Besides, weren't you the one who decided that his attitude was going to help?"

"Fine, you win," Harry returned with a slight grin.

“You better believe it,” Sirius smirked. “Now let’s get to it then, shall we?”

At Harry’s nod Sirius began drilling the instructions for the animagus potion into Harry’s head. He went over every instruction several times and had Harry reciting the steps back to him on command. When Harry was able to regurgitate the instructions perfectly whether in order or backwards or each step in a random order, Sirius finally decided that he had it down.

He decided to call it a night at this point for fear that practicing anything else might take Harry’s brain away from the potion. He wished Harry a goodnight and good luck and faded out of existence.

Harry began on the potion as soon as he woke up. He didn’t want to waste any time or give himself a chance to forget any of the steps. He drew his cauldron out of his trunk and picked out each of the ingredients he would need. He was soon feverishly working on the potion, hovering above the cauldron stirring the proper number of times clockwise or counter-clockwise as necessary or chopping, mashing, or mixing ingredients as directed. He performed each step with precision and was left with the desired color and thickness. The potion just had to simmer for three hours before it would be ready to be drunk.

Harry glanced at his clock and realized that he’d been at work for a couple hours. His stomach growled at him to emphasize the fact that he hadn’t eaten anything yet. He decided to obey his body’s demands and first headed out the door and into the bathroom. After washing up, Harry dressed and headed downstairs to fix himself something to eat. He strolled down the stairs and into the kitchen and began rummaging through the refrigerator.

His Aunt Petunia noticed Harry and, against her inclination to completely ignore her nephew due to the warning the Dursleys had received from the Order, reprimanded him. “And just what do you think you’re doing?” she questioned shrilly. “We already ate breakfast, and it’s too early for lunch. If you wanted anything, you should have been down here when I was serving. This is not some restaurant that

will cater to your wants. If you want to eat, you will do it on my terms. I don't need you messing about my kitchen."

Using every ounce of his will power to refrain from sampling some of his newfound wandless magical abilities, Harry had to take a moment to compose himself before he was able to form an adequate reply. "Fine. Maybe I'll go upstairs and write to my friend, Mad-Eye Moody, to tell him how little I'm being fed. You remember Mad-Eye, don't you? You met him at King's Cross this summer. He was wearing a bowler hat and had a crazy looking eye spinning around in its socket."

His aunt's demeanor turned from vengeful to fearful in record time. She remembered who he was talking about and remembered the threat that had been made as well. Not only that, but the boy had used that foul word in her home. She quickly glanced through the window to make sure nobody was nearby who could be eavesdropping, those pesky, nosey neighbors.

She forced a smile onto her face and managed to bite out, "Of course. Well I'll just leave you to fix yourself something then. Be sure to clean up after yourself," before storming out of the kitchen.

Harry smirked at his aunt's hasty retreat and returned to the task at hand. He ended up making himself a ham sandwich with a glass of juice. He sat down at the table to enjoy his makeshift meal. He ate in solitude and dutifully cleaned up after himself once he had finished.

He walked back up to his room and upon entering noticed a tiny owl zipping around excitedly. When the owl noticed his entrance, it immediately began circling above Harry's head. Using his Quidditch seeking skills, he deftly plucked the bird out of the air, saying, "Knock it off Pig." He relieved the owl of its burden before letting it go again. This time ignoring the pesky owl, Harry sat down on the edge of his bed to read the note.

Dear Harry,

Whoa mate, I know you must be feeling pretty down lately, but you don't have to take it out on me like that. Honestly, I don't know why you'd listen to Ginny. She just likes to make my life miserable, so

don't listen to anything she says about me. And speaking of Ginny, what's the big idea writing to her so much this summer? You know she has that crush on you, and you don't want to lead her on like that. The last thing we need is for her to reopen the Harry Potter fan club, right? I know she's with Dean now, but I doubt that'll last. You just shouldn't toy with her like that, mate.

And while we're talking about leading people on, I think Hermione might be writing her old pal Vicky again. I don't mean to get into anything, but I can't help but wonder if it's really safe for her to be writing him, you know? I mean, he goes to Durmstrang which is known for teaching the Dark Arts. Their old headmaster was a Death Eater, after all. Can we really be sure that he's on our side? I think we should talk to Hermione about it. She might take it more seriously if it was coming from the both of us.

What's the deal with you studying so much this summer? You've been stuck with the Dursley's every summer, but you've never studied much over the summer before. With you studying all summer, Hermione is going to be relentless about getting me to spend my entire summer buried under books. She'd probably have me read through all of the text books for all my classes next year before the term even starts. You're really leaving me hanging here, mate.

My summer's been pretty boring so far. I've had a bunch of chores to do around the house. The twins have their own flat in Diagon Alley, so they're not around much anymore. It's just me and Ginny here this summer. And she hasn't exactly been pleasant to be around lately, so I haven't had much of anything to do. Well, mate, don't let the muggles get you down, and write again soon.

Ron

Harry could only shake his head as he put down his friend's letter. Ron sure had a lot of nerve with what he'd said about Ginny. And he was still hung up on Hermione and Viktor. Well Harry was not about to get in the middle of that argument. Ron was blinded by his jealousy and not for the first time in his life either, Harry thought ruefully. He would have to admit that he liked Hermione sooner or later, and he would have to learn that he couldn't choose who his friend decided to

spend her time with. Harry believed Hermione when she said she only wanted to be friends with Viktor.

‘Maybe if Ron ever got a clue and a little courage he’d admit that he liked Hermione and end all of this nonsense once and for all,’ Harry thought to himself. He gave a derisive snort and answered his statement out loud: “Yeah, and maybe Voldemort will finally realize the error of his ways and volunteer at St. Mungo’s to help heal all those that have been hurt in the war.”

Harry knew that he had to set Ron straight about Ginny and Hermione, but he also knew that if he didn’t handle it right, he’d only make things worse. He wished his friend would just grow up a little so that he didn’t have to be so careful with what to say to him. His friend had an outrageous temper, and once he got worked up there was no reasoning with him. He decided not to write back just yet, figuring that he’d need the extra time to calm down and gather his thoughts together.

He still had over an hour to go before the potion would be ready for consumption. He decided to practice his wandless magic to pass the time. After 45 minutes, Harry switched to apparation practice. Harry knew he had the basics down and could apparate anywhere in the room without difficulty, so he decided to be a bit daring. He had yet to try apparating to a space outside the room he started in.

He slipped on his invisibility cloak to hide himself away from his relatives. Then he focused on the dining room since he knew nobody would be in there at this time. Since it was his first time apparating outside the room, he took his time to concentrate on his destination before activating his magic and disappearing from his bedroom. Slowing his apparation down to mask his arrival, Harry barely made a sound as he appeared in the dining room whole and in tact. Grinning to himself he began apparating to different rooms around the house until it was time to check on the potion.

He appeared back in his room and strode purposefully to the cauldron set up on the floor in the corner of the room. He ladled some of the potion into a glass and let it cool for a few minutes. Satisfied that he’d waited long enough, he lifted the glass and said, “Here goes

nothing," before downing the contents. It was only a moment before he started to feel the effects. He became drowsy and staggered towards his bed. He barely made it to the edge of his bed to pitch himself onto it as he was overtaken by the potion and succumbed to unconsciousness.

Harry found himself in a dark forest. There was little to no light, so Harry assumed it was nighttime, yet the forest was so thick that the sun may have been high in the sky without his noticing. Despite the lack of light, he was able to see surprisingly well. As his body began to move of its own accord, Harry realized that he was merely an observer in this vision. He had no control whatsoever. The body he was inhabiting stalked through the forest stealthily.

Harry was able to catch glimpses of his paws as he maneuvered through the overgrowth and trees. He had black fur and seemed to be feline. 'I must be a panther,' Harry thought to himself. 'This must be my animagus form.' Harry concentrated on the feel of his body, and he noticed the magic coursing through it. He committed the feeling to memory so that he could emulate that magic when it came time for him to transform.

The panther continued its progress through the thick growth on the forest floor, weaving in and out of trees as it silently stalked its prey. It sneaked up on another animal Harry was unable to recognize from the rare glimpses he received of it. When he drew in close, the panther pounced at it with blazing speed and quickly subdued the smaller animal.

Thrilled at his success (or should he say the panther's success?), Harry let out a mental whoop that the panther seconded with a victorious growl. Just then his vision blacked out. He assumed that marked the end of the vision, so he prepared to wake up. Without notice Harry's eyes were blasted with light. He was temporarily blinded as Harry felt air soaring all around him. As the spots began to clear from his eyes, Harry realized that he was facing the sun as it was beginning its descent. He also quickly noticed that he was not standing on the ground nor was he falling. At the moment he was gliding on a current of air.

Elated at the prospect of flying, Harry let out his second mental whoop of the day. He strained to catch a glimpse of himself as the body he inhabited flapped its wings. Harry could see that his wings were covered in black feathers. He tried to think of what kind of bird he could be. He didn't think he was a raven or a crow, but those were the only birds he could think of off-hand that were black.

Something inside of him seemed to insist that he was an owl. He had never seen a black owl before, but that didn't mean they didn't exist. And he just couldn't shake that nagging feeling inside him. He was a black owl. Harry concentrated on his magic again to note its form. It was very similar to the feel of the panther, he noticed. It made sense considering both spells would require transforming himself into an animal form. The minor difference between the two must just be the difference between the owl and the panther.

The owl descended into a forest. By now the sun had almost completely set, and the inside of the forest was plunged mainly in darkness. Harry could see as well as if he were in broad daylight, better in fact. His eyesight was sharp. He could probably see a needle on the ground a hundred feet away. He pinpointed a small rodent scurrying about on the forest floor. The owl spread its wings and deftly swooped down to snatch the critter in its talons before the mouse even realized it was in danger.

Harry again only had a moment to revel in his success before his vision blackened, and he was again plunged in darkness. He wondered if that was the last of his visions or if more would come to him. His question was answered as he was lifted out of his dreams and returned to the waking world.

Harry was mystified. He was under the impression that he would have been told which animal he was to take the form of as an animagus. He only expected to see one animal, not two. Did this mean that he got to choose which animal to become or what? He didn't dare hope that he could be both animals; he knew that was impossible. He'd have to ask Sirius about this the next time they met. Sirius sank into a chair bewildered while staring at his godson after Harry had dropped his bombshell. "What do you mean you saw two animals?" he finally asked. "You only get one."

"I know, that's what's got me so confused" Harry replied. "First I was this panther stalking through the forest. Next thing I know my vision blacks out. Then it comes back to me, only this time I'm an owl flying through the sky. That's not normal, is it?"

"No, it's definitely not normal," Sirius replied shortly as he paced around the small classroom, absentmindedly avoiding the few desks scattered about. "Are you certain you made the potion correctly? I mean absolutely positive? Is it even remotely possible that you made a mistake?"

"The potion was perfect, I'm sure of it," Harry responded, frustrated. "It was the right color, texture, thickness, everything. I'm sure I did it right. It couldn't have been the potion."

"This just doesn't make any sense," Sirius commented. "James and I read every book in the Hogwarts library about animagi, restricted section and all, and not once was there a mention of even the possibility of seeing more than one animal during the vision."

"What do you think it means?" Harry asked tentatively.

Sirius slumped his shoulders as he responded, "I just don't know."

"Maybe I get to choose which one I want to be" Harry suggested.

"Or maybe..." Sirius paused as he thought over the implications, "maybe you can be both."

Sirius' suggestion left Harry dumbfounded. He had never even considered the possibility seriously. It had entered his mind briefly at first, but he had quickly dashed the thought away figuring his godfather would do the same. It was unheard of for someone to have more than one animagus form; most didn't even have a single form. Then again, it was also unheard of for someone to see a vision of more than one animal.

Harry finally let himself consider the possibility that his godfather could be right. It brought a smile to his face. He couldn't wait to be either animal, but the thought that he could be both animals was an overwhelming one. He'd be able to fly without the aid of a broom. He'd be able to stalk through the Forbidden Forest back at Hogwarts without fear. He would be predator and not prey.

"Maybe you're right," Harry finally said. "It felt natural being in both the owl and the panther. And I made care to note the feel of the magic within the body while I was there so that I could replicate it here. Maybe I really can do both."

"Well it can't hurt to try, at least," Sirius replied with a grin.

Harry smiled back at his godfather. "So can we start then? Is there anything else I need to know?" Harry asked quickly.

"Anxious, are we?" Sirius teased. "Given your knowledge of wandless magic I suppose I don't have much to add. If this works like your other wandless magic and you already know how to manipulate your magic the right way, I imagine you're already 90 of the way there. All you've got to do is start doing the changes. It's best to start by changing one limb at a time back and forth. Once you're able to change each part of your body individually back and forth, then you can try for the full transformation."

Not wasting any time, Harry shut his eyes and shifted his focus inward. As he had done so many times now, Harry called forth his magic until he could feel it flowing freely. He concentrated the magic into his left arm and willed it to take the form he had felt in the panther during his vision. Once it felt right, Harry focused on the black furred paw he had seen stalking through the forest. With the picture held in his mind's eye, Harry willed his left arm to become the paw.

It was a weird feeling. Harry felt his arm changing, muscles and bones reforming as fur sprouted out covering the appendage. He could no longer wiggle his fingers; instead he could extend and retract sharp claws from his paw. He opened his eyes to find that he had been successful. It felt weird being human but having an animal

paw. But he shook off the feeling, smiling at his success. Harry glanced over to his godfather to see his reaction.

Sirius grinned as he shook his head at his godson. "I don't know whether to be proud or angry. It took me months and months of practice before I finally got that far, your father too, though he beat me there by a couple weeks. And here you are 30 seconds after you started with your arm transfigured. When I first brought up this training I thought maybe you'd finish by Christmas if we were lucky. The way things are looking now, you'll be done within a few days."

"Well all that wandless magic practice really helped," Harry replied wryly. "All I had to do was tap into my magic like usual, shape it into the form I felt in the vision, then will my arm into the paw and here I am," Harry waved his paw at his godfather.

"When you put it like that it sounds easy," Sirius responded sarcastically, "except for the fact that I've never been able to just feel magic or call it forth so readily like you. I'm starting to wonder if even Dumbledore has as much control and awareness of magic as you, Harry."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm nowhere near his skill. I saw him dueling Voldemort. He was incredible; they both were. I couldn't hold a candle to either of them," Harry finished despondently.

"Yet," Sirius retorted. "You're young Harry. But I've never seen anybody pick things up the way you have here. If you continue at this pace, by the end of the year you'll be holding your own in a duel with Dumbledore. Mark my words."

Harry just smiled at his godfather's enthusiasm. He was greatly emboldened by the praise, but he didn't let it go to his head. He didn't think it possible to become so powerful so quickly, but for the first time in a long time he felt hope blossoming inside himself. Sirius believed in him, and for now that was enough.

Chapter 3: Animals and Alleys

The next couple days flew by in a blur for Harry. He was constantly training and studying. He was really getting bored with his current supply of books as it mostly just contained old textbooks that he'd already been through in his classes. He also had the defense book he'd been given over Christmas to help him instruct the DA, but he'd already been through that book more than once. He longed to make a trip to Diagon Alley to expand his library and just to get out of the house and do something.

He was becoming quite proficient in his apparation training. He progressed from popping around his house to apparating around his neighborhood. He could apparate with relative ease now even across the entire neighborhood, but Sirius had warned him not to try doing a long distance apparation just yet for fear that he'd splinch himself. Harry was getting restless.

His animagus training had progressed rapidly. He was able to change every individual part of his body into either his panther or owl form at will, which delighted him to no end. He was anxious to make a full transformation, but Sirius had stopped Harry from doing it the night before and made him promise to wait until the next night to try it. Harry couldn't wait to go to sleep tonight.

He had written back to Ron berating his best friend for actually sneaking into Ginny's room to read the letter Harry had sent to her. He explained in no uncertain terms that he considered Ginny a valuable friend and that he had every intention of continuing to write to her throughout the summer. He told him that he and Ginny were just friends and that she was perfectly capable of looking out for herself and didn't need an overprotective brother hovering around sticking his nose in her business all the time.

He'd also told Ron that he had absolutely no intention of getting in the middle of one of his fights with Hermione about Viktor Krum. He told Ron that he was being rather ridiculous about the entire thing and warned his friend to drop the subject before things turned ugly.

It didn't take long for Harry to receive a reply back from Ron. He had gauged his friend correctly when he had decided that Ron would most likely fly off the handle after reading the letter. Ron had warned him off writing to Ginny any more with a veiled threat hanging over him if he continued to write her. Ron had also asked Harry just whose side he was on of the topic of Viktor Krum. Ron claimed that he was putting their friend in danger by not warning Hermione to stop writing the Bulgarian.

Harry decided not to bother responding to his irate friend. He knew that his friend would be in no state to listen to reason at the moment, so he didn't even bother trying. Ron's temper got the best of him far too often for anyone's good. Ginny was certainly right about one thing: Ron needed to grow up, and fast.

He had written to Ginny again after receiving Ron's reply. He'd talked about Ron's ridiculous threats and accusations a bit and other things as well. He told her that he had not yet mentioned the DA to anyone else yet, Ron and Hermione included, and asked her to hang onto his secret for just a little bit before he let his other friends in on his plans.

He received replies from both Neville and Luna, who were both surprised but glad to hear from him. They told him how sorry they were about the loss of his godfather. They also both asked if the DA would be continuing next year. Luna had, in her awkward way, told Harry that it was like having friends. Like so many other times, Harry had no idea how to respond to her.

Luna had also talked about the expedition she was on with her father to find the Crumple-Horned Snorkack. They had apparently been hot on the trail, but the animals kept eluding capture. She said she expected they will have caught one by the end of the month. Harry wondered what they were actually following but decided it might be best not to know.

Neville had seemed excited to be getting a new wand and had told Harry that he really didn't have to pay for it. He asked Harry if he really thought that his magic would improve with a wand that was suited especially for him rather than his dad. He also said that his Gran had been a little upset that he had put himself in danger but that

she was proud of him for what he had done. Harry was glad to see that his friend was finally getting some positive reinforcement; maybe his confidence would improve over the coming year.

Harry had taken to jogging and working out in the mornings on his godfather's suggestion. He had said that most wizards overlooked the physical aspects of a duel. Dodging could be more effective than a shielding charm, especially when dealing with Unforgivables. And the endurance to last through duels taking up to several hours and multiple opponents was extremely important given the war he found himself in.

His running and workout routine would help him build up his endurance and his speed. His reflexes were already quite sharp, which he attributed to Quidditch practice and growing up with the Dursleys trying to avoid getting hit. He decided not to just work on that but to also build up some muscle as well. You never know when he might need to resort to physical violence instead of magical.

When Sirius had made the suggestion, Harry had no choice but to agree. Back in the Department of Mysteries, the duel with the death eaters had been as physical as it was magical. The extra quickness, strength, and endurance were sure to come in handy next time. Harry smiled ruefully at that thought. He no longer thought of it in terms of if he ever met another death eater in combat but rather when.

Harry was already considering including physical training in the DA. He knew he had to talk about the DA with his friends soon, especially Hermione. She was, after all, the brains behind the operation. He would need her help working out all the details of what he would be teaching when and organizing everything in a manner that would be acceptable to present to Dumbledore, and he could use her help with the magical contract.

Harry had settled into a bit of a routine the past couple of days. He would wake up, grab a quick bite to eat, then go for a jog around his neighborhood. He reckoned he ran a good four kilometers every morning. He would follow that up with a series of other exercises: push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, jumping rope, punching a bag that his cousin used to train for boxing, among other things.

He would then shower and get cleaned up and ready for the day. He'd eat an early lunch, then return to his room to study. After a couple hours he would begin practicing wandless magic. He would eventually move on to apparation followed by animagus practice. Afterwards he would eat dinner then spend the rest of the night studying and taking care of any personal matters such as letter writing.

His morning workout routine was leaving Harry extremely sore and tired, but he knew that it was only because he was not used to the physical exercise. It would only take a little while before he began to get the hang of it. He felt genuinely good about himself for the first time in quite a while. It is amazing what a sense of purpose can do for you, coupled with a plan of action. It is always best to keep busy lest you become bored and begin to brood. Harry didn't leave himself any time for that as even his dreams were spent training with Sirius.

That night, as scheduled, Harry made his first attempt at a full transformation into his animus forms. "Here goes nothing," Harry remarked with a grin.

"Just do what you've been doing with the partial transformations, only this time concentrate on the whole animal rather than individual parts. You'll do fine," Sirius advised practically.

Harry shut his eyes as he concentrated. He pictured the panther in his mind and began building his magic up inside himself. He let it flow through his entire body until he could feel it from his toes all the way to his fingers and head. He then focused his magic into that of the panther transformation and pictured a panther in his mind. Once in focus, he willed his magic to make it happen.

He could feel himself changing all over. He sunk down onto all four legs and whipped his tail back and forth. Opening his eyes, he found himself lower to the ground than he had been when he'd closed them. He could see his godfather smiling at him proudly and knew that he had transformed perfectly. He bounded about the room and pounced at his godfather unexpectedly, pinning him to the ground. Harry rolled off and reemerged in his human form.

“I’ll get you for that,” Sirius threatened as he rubbed his back. “Did you have to be so rough? I’m not as young as I used to be, you know?”

“Sorry,” Harry said around a sheepish grin. “Couldn’t help myself.”

“Well if you’re done savagely attacking me for the moment, perhaps you’d like to give the owl a shot,” Sirius input, still rubbing his back.

“Whatever you say, old man,” Harry retorted teasingly. He closed his eyes and repeated the process of building up his magic. This time he changed it slightly to reflect his owl form, then pictured the owl in his mind. He willed his magic to make the transformation. When he opened his eyes he felt shrunk; he was even lower to the ground than before. He stretched out his wings and beat them experimentally. He rose from the ground a couple inches before sinking right back down.

He began flapping his wings tentatively and lifted himself off the ground. He flew around the room slowly gathering his bearings before swooping around the room, delighting in his newfound freedom. He could fly! He swooped toward his godfather who ducked out of the way. He swung himself around and moved toward Sirius slowly this time and perched on his shoulder. His godfather stroked the feathers on his neck a couple times before Harry took off again. He landed on the ground this time and was replaced by human Harry moments later, a large smile plastered across his face.

“That was incredible!” Harry exclaimed.

Sirius only cocked an eyebrow and let his godson continue.

“I’ve always loved flying, but this is so much different than flying on a broomstick. This is just me in the air completely free. I can’t wait to fly out in the sky in the open air, free as a bird,” Harry said wistfully.

Sirius smiled at Harry’s excitement. “That’s actually a good idea. You should spend some time each day in your animus forms to get used

to moving around and using the different muscles of the animals. The only trouble will be finding a place where you can do so inconspicuously.”

“Well I’m not going to find anyplace suitable in Little Whinging. I would need to go someplace like the Forbidden Forest or perhaps even the forest around the Burrow,” Harry thought out loud, grinning widely.

Sirius let go of a sigh knowing that Harry was right. He would need to use long distance apparation to find a suitable place. “You’re right. I just wish there was someone we could have keep an eye on you just in case.”

“You worry too much, Siri,u,s” Harry replied. “I’ll be fine. I haven’t had any trouble at all with my apparation, and I’m able to apparate all around Little Whinging without any difficulty. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Sirius let go of another sigh. “It’s not that I doubt your abilities Harry, but this is the first time you’ve ever tried anything like this. Things could easily go wrong.”

“I’ll be extra careful about it. I promise,” Harry replied.

“All right,” Sirius finally conceded.

Harry could only grin at the man who was the closest thing to a father he had ever known.

OoOoO

Harry began his routine normally the next day. He went for his morning jog and worked out afterwards. It was after lunch that his schedule changed. As soon as he polished off his sandwich, Harry prepared to apparate to the outskirts of Hogsmeade. From there he’d head into the Forbidden Forest to transform into the panther. Afterwards he would take flight in owl form before returning to number 4 Privet Drive for the rest of the day.

Harry said goodbye to his owl and told her where he'd be and that he'd be back later in the afternoon. Some people might think it weird to be telling an owl so much, but she always had an uncanny ability to know what was going on and understand what he was saying. She was a really intelligent owl.

He apparated into Hogsmeade near the Forbidden Forest a moment later. He rushed into the woods and made his first transformation in the real world. A panther was soon stalking through the forest, maneuvering through all the growth of plants on the forest floor and weaving in and out of trees blocking his path. He nimbly traversed the tree laden grounds. The trees weren't thick enough to really impair his movement, so he was able to move around quite freely.

After a while he slowed down into a stealthier stalk through the forest. His movements were silent and he stuck to the shadows to blend in as much as possible. He kept low to the ground to keep hidden from other animals in the area. He decided to practice his hunting skills as the panther and tried to pick up the scent of an animal nearby. He finally thought he found something and followed it as best he could. After several minutes he came upon a rabbit meandering about. He slowly snuck up on the creature and prepared to pounce. As he was about to jump out, the rabbit noticed him and shot out of there like a bullet.

Always one for a challenge, Harry quickly darted after the smaller animal. His long stride allowed him to easily catch up, but the rabbit was much quicker in changing directions making it hard to stop the small beast. Soon enough Harry had the poor rabbit cornered. Fear was clearly visible in its eyes, knowing that it had no way to escape the large feline. Rather than move in for the kill, Harry merely gave the rabbit a poke with his paw then ran off, as if they were merely playing a game of tag.

Harry knew that the time might come where he would need to catch his own food and be forced to kill an animal in that situation. Sirius was proof enough that it could happen. But he had no intention of killing without purpose. He would never kill an animal just because he could or for sport. That was senseless.

Harry ran around for a bit longer, enjoying the exercise in his panther form. After some time he could see Hagrid's hut at the edge of the forest and Hogwarts castle in the distance. He decided to turn around and head further into the forest. It wouldn't do for a panther to be seen running about the forest by Hagrid or anyone else at the school.

After several more minutes running through the forest, Harry decided it was time to give his other form a shot. He shifted back into human form before making the change into an owl. He quickly fluttered up to a tree branch high off the ground. After a moment he took off again and rose above the canopy of trees shadowing the forest. He broke into free air and let the sun wash over him. He flapped his wings to rise high into the air before leveling out and riding the air currents.

He was able to mostly glide at this point, letting currents of air and thermals carry him around with just the occasional flap of his wings to correct his position. He found that he could control his movement somewhat by shifting the feathers in his wings a bit. It was awkward and would take some getting used to, but it was incredibly fun to play with. He began swooping down and pulling back up, enjoying the complete freedom of movement. He could go anywhere at all like this.

Harry could see Hogsmeade in the distance and decided to pay the town a little visit in his current form. He flew around the town for a while, looking in windows and at the few people wandering the streets. He could see Madame Rosmerta in the Three Broomsticks tending the bar for the couple of patrons inside. The town seemed eerily quiet and dead. Harry reckoned that it was because the only time he'd ever been in town before had been during Hogsmeade weekends at Hogwarts with hundreds of other students. The town just didn't seem the same without them.

He rose into the air and left the town behind. 'This is what life is all about,' Harry thought to himself. He could go out and just have fun, completely free to do what he wanted. His whole life he had felt like a prisoner, caged in. He never had any say in his life. He was stuck with the Dursley's for 10 years of his life and sent back there every summer despite numerous protests. They always kept him locked up as best they could. At Hogwarts the teachers were always trying to

keep the students confined to keep them safe and keep an eye on them.

Out here, Harry left all of that behind him. This was freedom: no more cages to hold him in, just the air beneath his wings. He was free to soar the skies and do whatever he pleased. He had never felt so alive.

After some time Harry figured that he ought to head back to Privet Drive. He dove down to the ground and pulled up to make a soft landing. Once safely on the ground, Harry changed back into human form and apparated back to his bedroom with the Dursleys. "I could definitely get used to that part of my training," Harry told Hedwig when he had arrived. "Do you enjoy flying that much, Hedwig?"

His owl gave him a strange look and hooted at him.

"You probably have no idea what I'm talking about, do you? You've yet to see me fully transformed. Well you're in for a bit of a shock I should say." And so Harry transformed into the black owl to say hello to Hedwig as one owl to another. Harry hooted a "Hello Hedwig" to his snowy owl.

"Is that you, my human Harry?" a strange yet familiar voice filled Harry's consciousness.

"What was that?" Harry tried to say out loud, though it only came out as a hoot. "Hedwig?"

"It is you, isn't it?" was the only reply.

"Can all owls talk this way?" Harry asked.

"All magical owls can communicate to each other," she told him.

"This is amazing. I always wondered how you could understand me so well. Turns out you know the language but just can't speak it the way humans do. How are we speaking to each other anyway?" Harry asked.

“Mind speak. Magical animals lack the means to speak with our mouths, so we do so with our minds,” came Hedwig’s reply. “How is it that you have become one of us, human Harry?”

“I’ve been training to become an animagus,” he explained, “so I can turn into an animal form. I can become both an owl and a panther. You said all magical animals communicate this way? Does that mean I’ll be able to talk to all magical animals just like I am with you right now?” Harry asked imagining the possibilities.

“Yes and no. Most animals do not understand speech. Since owls spend so much time with humans, we often pick up human speech. Other animals you can communicate with in a way, by sending feelings or images. You can send calming feelings and images to an animal that is frightened if you wish to calm it down to show it that you mean no harm, for instance. Phoenixes are the only magical creatures that have their own language. We cannot understand their speech,” Hedwig dutifully explained.

While Harry would have loved to be able to talk to Fawkes, this new information was still incredible and opened up many possibilities for Harry. “I wonder if I can learn to mind speak in my human form,” Harry mused.

“I do not know, human Harry. I have never heard of a human who could communicate with us before even in animal form, let alone human form.”

“Well, it’s worth a shot at least,” Harry decided. “But anyway, I should get back to my training. It was nice talking to you, Hedwig.”

“It was nice to be able to speak with you too, human Harry” Hedwig replied.

Harry reverted back to human form and affectionately stroked Hedwig’s feathers. She gave him an appreciative hoot in reply. Harry then turned his attention to his studies.

OoOoO

“Do you know of any spells I could use to change my appearance?” Harry asked his godfather.

“Why do you ask?” Sirius questioned suspiciously.

“Well now that I have long distance apparation worked out, I thought it was time for me to take a trip to Diagon Alley. If I don’t get some new books to study at the very least, then I’ll never get anything accomplished this summer. I can’t just keep re-reading all my old text books.”

“Ok, I get your point. There isn’t much you can do apart from the simple glamour charms most witches use to do their makeup. They work the same way muggle makeup does in covering up the surface instead of actually changing your appearance. There are charms to color your hair and some that can grow your hair temporarily as well. There isn’t much beyond that you can do to change your appearance which is why a metamorphmagus like Tonks is so valuable.

“Well I can’t walk around in broad daylight looking like my usual self without drawing a crowd,” Harry replied.

“I agree. I think I remember the hair charms well enough. You’ll want to wear a hat or something to cover up your scar. If we could get you out of those glasses as well, that might be enough for you to wander around unnoticed.”

“Unless you’ve got a spell to fix my eyesight as well, I’ll be keeping the glasses, thank you,” Harry retorted.

“Have you ever heard of contact lenses?” Sirius asked.

“Of course, muggles use them in place of glasses. They go right into your eyes...oh. How do you propose I get some? I don’t know of any muggle eye doctors in the area.”

“There is a place in Diagon Alley you can go. If you go early enough you should be able to get the lenses before the streets become too crowded.”

“Ok, so how about those hair charms?”

OoOoO

Harry woke up with the sun the next morning. He didn't want to mess up his routine, so he went for his usual jog and workout extra early this morning. After he was finished, he showered and dressed. He performed the charms to lengthen his hair to about his shoulders and to color it a dark blond. Then he transfigured a tissue into a bandana which he wore on his head to hide his scar from view.

Harry took a good look at himself in the mirror. His face was the same, but looked so much different with his hair changed the way it was. The only telltale sign that he was still Harry Potter were his wire-framed glasses and the green eyes behind them.

Satisfied with his appearance, he apparated into Diagon Alley just outside of the Leaky Cauldron. His first stop was to be Gringotts, the wizarding bank, because he only had a couple galleons left on himself. He walked quickly through the streets and up to the large, white building. As usual, there was a goblin sentry standing at the doors. Harry gave the goblin a polite nod as he entered the building. There were several available goblin tellers, so Harry chose the closest one and walked up. “Potter vault please,” Harry requested, already handing over his key.

“This is not the key to the Potter vault,” the goblin stated in a no-nonsense tone of voice, clearly feeling that his time was being wasted.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked incredulously. “I've used it to get to my vault before. Griphook took me down.”

The goblin looked up sharply, but his features were indistinguishable. “This is the key to the trust vault of Harry James Potter. It is not the key to the Potter family vault as you had requested.”

Harry was dumbfounded. "Potter family vault? I thought my vault was my parent's vault. Can you tell me who controls the Potter vault now?" Harry questioned, wondering if it was possible that he still had some family left.

"The Potter family vault is currently in the control of Albus Dumbledore until Harry Potter, the only remaining Potter heir, comes of age," the goblin explained.

"So you're saying that I can't get access to the vault until I turn 17?" Harry asked to make sure he understood everything correctly.

"I said you could not access the vault until you come of age. You wizards may consider 17 to be your coming of age, but we goblins consider it to be 15. After the heir turns 15, the executor is required to relinquish control of the account to the heir."

"But I turned 15 last summer, and I was never given control of the family vault," Harry retorted indignantly.

"Did you ever ask Mr. Dumbledore to hand over control to you?" the goblin asked impatiently.

"I didn't even know the vault existed before today, so how was I supposed to know I had to ask for control over it?" Harry asked, annoyed.

"I could have an official notice sent to Mr. Dumbledore giving him until the end of the month to hand over control to you before it is forcibly taken from him if you would like," the goblin offered.

"That would be perfect. Thank you for your help," Harry replied politely. That would give Dumbledore about two weeks to give Harry control to his family vault. "In the meantime, can I visit my vault please?" Harry asked the goblin.

"Certainly," the goblin replied. "Griphook! Take Mr. Potter to his vault please."

The familiar goblin waved Harry forward and led him to a cart that would take them down to the vaults.

“It’s nice to see you again, Griphook,” Harry said politely.

“Beg your pardon?” was Griphook’s startled reply.

“Oh, you probably don’t remember me. You took me down to my vault the first time I was ever here five years ago. I was with my friend Hagrid at the time,” Harry explained.

“I remember perfectly,” the goblin replied. “You were with the half-giant that day. I was just surprised you remembered me. Most humans don’t pay attention to us goblins. We’re all the same to them.”

“Oh, well I know lots of wizards treat magical creatures as beneath them, but I never bought into any of that. I have friends who are house elves, werewolves, half-giants, and half-veela. One of my best friends started up an organization to promote elfish welfare,” Harry elucidated.

“Well Mr. Potter, you are certainly unique among your kind,” the goblin stated.

“Please, just call me Harry.”

“Very well, Harry,” said Griphook. “I hope you don’t find me too presumptuous, but why have you dyed your hair to another color? Your hair was black the last time we met.”

“I don’t want anyone to notice me while I’m walking around Diagon Alley today. Not only would any death eaters who saw me try to either capture or kill me, but Dumbledore and his followers would try to capture me as well. So it’s best if nobody knows who I really am,” Harry explained.

The cart suddenly stopped. "We have arrived. Key?" Griphook held out his hand.

Harry handed over the key and grabbed the lantern as he exited the cart after the goblin. Griphook opened the vault door, and Harry stepped inside. He began filling his money pouch, and it was soon stuffed to the brim with galleons.

"Might I make a suggestion, Harry?" Griphook asked.

"Of course" Harry replied.

"You seem to be withdrawing quite a bit of gold today. Would it not be easier to just use one of our bottomless money bags?" Griphook asked.

Harry looked at Griphook questioningly for a moment before asking the obvious question. "What's a bottomless money bag exactly?"

Griphook looked surprised that Harry had never heard of one before. "It is a bag that is linked directly to your vault. You just state the amount of money you need, and it will be automatically transferred from your account to the bag."

"Brilliant!" Harry exclaimed. "How can I get one?"

"If you'll just follow me back to the cart and up to the surface, I can arrange everything for you. There is an initial fee of 35 galleons to get you set up with the bag and an additional 15 galleons per month after that. For an extra 5 galleons we can key extra people to your bag. Only one who has been keyed will be able to withdraw money from your account through the bag. That way nobody but yourself or anyone you designate will be able to take money from your account, so you need not fear if you lose the bag." Griphook explained.

"Great" Harry said as he dumped the contents of his bag and counted out 35 galleons. He turned to Griphook and said "Lead on."

And so, twenty minutes later, Griphook handed Harry the bag that was now linked directly to his account that would allow him to withdraw any amount at any given time. Before he left Harry asked the goblin "Do you have a record of how much gold I have in my account? I don't want to end up spending all my money without even realizing it."

"Of course, Mr. Pot – I mean Harry. Let me just find the latest statement," Griphook responded as he began rifling through some files. "Ah, here it is. You have in your personal account an amount equaling 51,213 galleons, 7 sickles, and 3 knuts. Your money is not all in that form, obviously, but that is the total amount of money available to you."

"Wow," Harry sputtered. "Thanks Griphook; you've been a big help."

"You are welcome, Harry," the goblin replied formally. "It was a pleasure to do business with you."

"And you as well," Harry responded before walking out of the office and through the hallway to the main chamber of the bank. He exited the bank and headed immediately toward the second-hand robe shop. Sirius had explained to Harry that the eyewear store was just across the street from it.

As he walked through the door of the shop, a middle aged witch greeted him cheerfully from behind the counter. "Can I help you, young man?"

"Yes" Harry replied. "I'm looking for contact lenses to replace these glasses." Harry momentarily lifted the glasses off of his face.

"Ah, now that I can do. Can I see your glasses for a moment, please?" the witch asked politely. Harry passed his glasses to the woman. "My, my, my. Your eyes are magnificent. You certainly shouldn't be hiding them behind these glasses. Normally I'd offer lenses to change your eye color, but with those startling eyes, you'll want the clear variety. I'll just be a moment. Here you go, dear." She handed Harry back his glasses and slipped into the back room.

Harry slipped his glasses back on with his cheeks flaming up from the woman's comments. Ever since his third year he had been especially proud of his green eyes because they were the only physical trait that people associated with his mother.

He looked around the shop and found several racks full of glasses. Some were normal looking, others had various dials all over them like the omnioculars he had used at the Quidditch World Cup. There was also a rack with magical eyes, much like the one Moody had, displayed.

After a couple minutes the witch returned. "All right, I've got you a nice pair of clear contacts that I matched to the prescription of your glasses, and I've got a pair of our automatically correcting lenses that will sense your needs and adjust to them. Would you like to try them out?"

"Yes, please," Harry replied holding his hand out. She handed him both boxes explaining which was which as she did so. He tried on the ones matched to his glasses, and, as expected, found his vision returned to normal. He carefully took the lenses out and tried the other pair.

The difference between the two was surprising to Harry, although it really shouldn't have been. The Dursleys hadn't taken Harry to an eye doctor since the school forced them to buy glasses for him when he first started attending. His prescription had probably changed since then, but the Dursleys would never bother to take Harry in to check. He could see much more clearly with these lenses than he could ever remember seeing.

Harry quickly made the decision to get the automatically adjusting ones without any color. But he thought that changing his eye color might help his disguise some, so he decided to ask for some brown colored lenses as well. The woman complied after a nominal complaint about hiding his natural eye color and ran into the back room to grab the additional pair of lenses.

When she reemerged Harry handed her back the clear pair that he was not buying. She rung up the two pairs he wanted and said "The clear contacts are 45 galleons, and the brown ones are 50, which brings your total to 95 galleons."

"95 galleons," Harry repeated while holding his money pouch. He reached inside and emptied the 95 gold coins that had magically appeared onto the counter. Harry took off his glasses and put on his new brown pair of lenses. "Thank you for your help," Harry told the store clerk with a grin.

"Any time," the woman replied as the door swung shut behind Harry.

Harry checked out his reflection in the glass of the store's window. He was pleased to see that he hardly recognized himself and was confident that nobody would figure out who he really was in this disguise. He made his first stop the magical storage shop. Before he began buying everything else, he needed a place to put everything. His current trunk was big and bulky and already filled to capacity. Harry remembered Moody's trunk with its 7 compartments from his fourth year at school and decided he wanted something similar.

Harry entered the store and began looking at the trunks on display. There were only a few trunks there, and they were pretty basic. There was a single compartment trunk with double the space of a normal trunk, one with quadruple the normal space, and a couple three compartment trunks with various added dimensions to each compartment. It was not what Harry was hoping for.

He approached the man behind the counter. "Excuse me, sir."

"Yes, what can I help you with, boy?" the man replied gruffly.

Harry did not like to be called boy, especially in the tone of voice the man used. It reminded him too much of his Uncle Vernon, but he tried not to let it bother him. "I was wondering if those were the only trunks you had in stock or if you had more of a selection to choose from," Harry answered, maintaining a polite tone.

“Course we got more. We only keep the most basic out in the front. The rest are in the back. What’d you have in mind?”

“I don’t know what’s available. What’s the top model you have?”

The man eyed Harry suspiciously for a moment before finally ordering “Follow me.” He led Harry through a door in the back to find a warehouse much larger than the building it was housed in. ‘Magical storage indeed’ Harry thought to himself. They were soon in the section holding all the magical trunks. The man led Harry up to one trunk in particular.

“This is the top of the line. It has seven compartments total. The first three compartments have six times the storage capacity of a regular trunk. The fourth compartment also has six times the regular space, but it is done up with shelves. It’s generally used as a bookshelf. That leaves three other compartments, which are actually rooms. Two of the rooms are five meters long, four meters wide and three meters tall. The last room is eight square meters, and again three meters tall,” the man explained in a superior tone.

Harry nodded approvingly. “That would definitely do it,” he muttered to himself, then more loudly asked, “How much does it cost?”

The man gave a toothy grin. ‘This is where the game ends,’ he thought to himself. “More than a kid like you can afford,” he sneered, sweeping his hand toward Harry. “Now why don’t you stop wasting my time and either make a purchase or move on to another store?”

Harry dropped his polite front and stood up straight and tall as he retorted. “Now listen here, sir. I don’t know what kind of a shop you’re running here, but where I come from it’s customary for you to actually try to sell the merchandise instead of chasing your customers away. Now you can either give me a price and an apology, or I can turn around and find myself another shop to do my business at. Your choice.”

The man looked unsure of how to proceed for a moment before adopting an apologetic visage. “I’m terribly sorry sir. I don’t know what

came over me. The base trunk costs 1000 galleons. Normally it would be an extra 10 galleons to key you into it, but I'll wave the charge for you. I'll key you in as the master, and you'll be able to add and remove others at will. Only someone keyed in can open the trunk on their own, but you can take people in without actually keying them in if you'd like."

"You said that was just for the base trunk," Harry commented. "What else can be added onto it."

The man's demeanor screamed forced politeness. He obviously still doubted that Harry would actually be making such a purchase, but to his credit, the man answered Harry's question without preamble. "The rooms of the base trunk are completely bare. Many people wish to have the rooms furnished. We have a few different styles to choose from in that capacity. There are also a couple additional features that can be added on."

"Yes, I'd definitely want it to be furnished. Can I have a tour of one of your furnished trunks?" Harry asked the salesman.

"Certainly," the man replied in his salesman tone. "Just follow me." Harry did, and the man led him up to a trunk a few meters away. The trunk was a deep, reddish wood, and had seven little circles evenly distributed across its front. The man reached out with his right hand and touched his index finger into the last circle. A moment later he quietly intoned, "Open."

The lid of the trunk popped open, and the man climbed inside. Harry followed after him and entered into the large room of the trunk. The walls, he noticed, were the same deep red wood of the trunk's exterior and were bare save for the scattered torches that were hung up to provide light to the room. Not far in front of him was a cozy looking couch and a couple of arm chairs. There was a wooden table set up in front of the furniture, and a small brick fireplace set into the wall. There were also two bookshelves set up against the walls of the room.

The kitchen was in one corner of the room, with a small table and four chairs set up in front of it. It had a stove, oven, refrigerator, sink with a drying rack next to it, many different cabinets, which upon inspection contained a few place settings, plates, pots, pans, and silverware. As Harry looked around the room, the salesman told him of all the different things that were included in this package.

The fireplace, for instance, had some sort of charm placed in it to dissipate all the smoke that rose up it. The wood walls, thankfully, were fireproof. What Harry considered to be the refrigerator would preserve anything that Harry placed in it for as long as he should like. The stove could be lit with just a tap from Harry's wand. He was encouraged to try out the furniture, to note how comfortable it was. And Harry had to admit, it was.

The tour continued into one of the smaller rooms, which had been converted into a bedroom. The walls were again bare save for a couple torches, while the queen-sized bed was fitted with dark blue with a gold trim. There was a desk in the room as well as a dresser. A closet was set into the far wall.

The third room was set up similar to the bedroom he had just vacated. It had all the same furniture, only slightly different in style and color. Harry listened as the salesman explained that there were also trunks where the last room was set up as a study instead of a second bedroom. Harry mulled that over for a bit.

He highly doubted that he'd ever have company spending the night in his trunk. So a second bedroom hardly seemed necessary. Then again, he didn't really have that much need of a study either. It would provide more bookshelves, though Harry doubted that he'd be filling the two in the main room any time in the near future, so that was hardly a concern. And he had a desk in each of the bedrooms anyway.

In the end, Harry requested to see a model where the third room was converted into a study. He just couldn't decide which one to go with. While they were looking at that second model, Harry commented, "You know, the only thing missing from these trunks is a bathroom. Toss that in, and you could live in there full time." That earned him a

toothy grin from the salesman who informed Harry that there was a new model that did include a bathroom.

So the two took a tour of that model, and Harry was showed into the bathroom. It was small, no doubt about that. But it had a toilet, sink, and a shower. In other words, it had everything it needed to have.

The man asked Harry if he was satisfied with the tour or if he'd like to look around some more. Harry said that he was ready to leave, so the man took his hand again and with a whispered "exit trunk" they found themselves in the warehouse again.

The man turned to Harry once again and asked "Is the trunk satisfactory?"

Instead of answering the question, Harry had a few of his own. "You mentioned that there were some additional features that could be added on. What kind of features are available?"

"Well there are some standard features to protect the finish of the trunk against wear and tear and even from some spell damage. It wouldn't hold up against an Unforgivable or anything, but it would protect the trunk from many different spells should they go astray and strike the trunk. There is also a feature that can be added which will allow you to be able to shrink and expand the trunk. Normally, a shrinking charm would wreak havoc on the space that the trunk holds, but a recent development has allowed us to get around that problem."

"That sounds good," Harry replied. "I think I'd like a trunk with a study and a bathroom. And I'd also like the additional features, both to protect the trunk and to allow me to shrink it, added on as well. Now how much would that set me back?"

The man gave a small smile. "As I said, the base trunk is 1000 galleons. The standard furnishings are an additional 2000 galleons, with the addition of a bathroom being an added 500 galleons. Normally, the additional features would be an added 50 galleons each, but I'll wave those for you."

Harry grinned right back at the man. "I'll take it."

"Excellent," the salesman beamed. "It will take me about five minutes to get everything prepared. You can wait out in the front of the store."

The man made as if to lead Harry out, but Harry held up a hand. "Don't worry about me. I think I can find my way back. Thank you for your help."

"Believe me, the pleasure was all mine, Mr....?"

"Thomas," Harry blurted out. "Dean Thomas." It was the first name Harry could think of that didn't stand out. He couldn't use Ron's name because the Weasleys were fairly well known. And he was learning that many knew of the Longbottoms as well, so Harry didn't want to use Neville's name again. And Dean Thomas sounded more believable than Seamus Finnigan. Harry later realized that he didn't have to use the name of one of his roommates, but as long as it worked, he wasn't going to worry about it.

So Harry made his way back out to the front of the store and browsed around a bit while his purchase was being finalized. He found a selection of backpacks that were charmed to be featherweight and had various amounts of expanded space that might appeal to him come the next Hogwarts term, but Harry had no need of such a thing at the moment, so he just continued to wander the small shop until the salesman came back.

A short while later, Harry was exiting the shop 3500 galleons poorer. In his pocket was a shrunken down trunk that only Harry could open at the moment and , if needed, he could live out of, and it would definitely be able to store all of his possessions, as few as those were. But that's one problem Harry was out to rectify.

He directed himself toward the bookstore for his next stop. He walked through the now busy streets reveling in his anonymity. In the past when he walked through Diagon Alley, people always stared and talked about him as he passed. They treated him as if he was just

some figure-head but not a real person. He no longer had to endure strangers introducing themselves to him wanting to shake his hand and meet the famous "Boy-Who-Lived." Today he was a normal 15 year old boy going shopping.

He walked into Flourish and Blott's to find the store relatively empty, quite different than what he was used to. Harry was used to coming here close to the start of term to find it crowded with students and parents trying to get that year's textbooks. Now there were just a few scattered customers, and the place was almost as quiet as a library.

Harry grabbed a basket and began browsing the shelves of the store. He wanted a variety of books, so he grabbed anything that looked interesting or that looked like it might help in his training. Advanced Dueling Tactics, Advanced Dueling Spells, Arithmancy Made Easy, Simple Charms That Could Save Your Life, A Guide to Protection Spells, Stealth: the Art of Sneaking Around, Occlumency: Shield Your Mind, Magical Protection: Standard Wards for the Home, Magical Contracts: Know What You're Getting Yourself Into, and many other books made their way into Harry's basket.

He found several auror handbooks, a couple more charms books, several books on transfiguration including Animating the Inanimate, and several books in Defense Against the Dark Arts. He also grabbed a couple books on teaching techniques and how to lead a large group of people effectively.

As he added more and more books to his basket, he noticed that he never ran out of room and that the weight never became unbearable. He figured the basket must be charmed to keep expanding and to always be light weight regardless of its contents, similar to those backpacks he was looking at. He noticed another book that he added to his pile: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About the Unforgivables (short of how to cast them).

Harry took his large collection of books to the counter where he was greeted by the friendly old shopkeeper. "All set, young man?"

"Yes sir," Harry replied politely as he placed his basket on the counter.

“Merlin’s beard. Quite a collection you seem to be building up. I suppose you’ll be needing an enchanted bag to carry these around in...”

“Oh that won’t be necessary,” Harry interrupted as he pulled out his new trunk. He put his hand on top of it and said loudly and clearly, “Full size,” as he cast a wandless finite incantatem. Acting like it was the most normal thing in the world, Harry continued, “I’ll just store them in here,” gesturing towards his now full sized trunk.

“Remarkable. They have the shrinking charm added in there now, huh? I guess it was only a matter of time since you young’uns can’t use magic ‘til you’re 17.” Harry smirked to himself. That was the reaction he was hoping for. He needed some way to shrink and unshrink his trunk at will in public without arousing suspicion about underage or, even worse, wandless magic. So he decided to just make it look as though he wasn’t doing any magic at all. Make it look like it’s the trunk and not him. The attention is all on the trunk then and not on Harry.

“Dear me, I seem to have gotten carried away with myself. I’ll just ring you up then, shall I?” the old shopkeep said. He began sifting through the basket and adding each book to the tab. He handed each book to Harry to put in his trunk as he finished with it. When he lifted the book on the Unforgivables he paused, “Normally I’d be hesitant to sell a book such as this to one as young as yourself, but I suppose that with You-Know-Who back you’ll be growing up well before your time anyway.” With that he handed the book over.

When the last book was in Harry’s trunk the shopkeeper said “That will be 127 galleons, 11 sickles, 3 knuts.” Harry repeated the amount and fished out that exact amount from his money pouch. He handed over the coins to the old man.

“Thank you, young man. Have a splendid day, and stay safe,” the shopkeeper called out to Harry with a smile.

“Thank you, sir. You do the same,” Harry said to the man as he tucked his now shrunken trunk back into his pocket and exited the store. He had to stop himself from waving to Ernie Macmillan, a Hufflepuff in his year at Hogwarts, as the boy passed by on the street, remembering at the last moment that he was in disguise. It was definitely best not to call attention to himself.

As Harry continued walking down the busy street he felt his stomach grumble hungrily. He decided to make his way over to the Leaky Cauldron for a bite to eat before he continued shopping. After maneuvering through the bustling crowd, Harry entered the dingy pub. He spotted Tom the bartender and headed his way to request a meal.

As Harry walked towards the bar, what he saw made him stop in his tracks. Two faces Harry had not expected to see today swam into view, one very familiar, the other not so much, yet he knew both people. He stared intently into the somber face of Remus Lupin who was sitting at the bar with a woman who Harry unmistakably identified as Nymphadora Tonks. He may not have recognized her face, but nobody else could pull off the hot pink hair, nor would many others even try to. Besides, how many pink haired women could Professor Lupin know?

Harry quietly and discretely sidled up to the bar to try to eavesdrop on their conversation. He was very careful to remain as inconspicuous as possible; the last thing he needed was to be recognized by either of the two. He'd never hear the end of it.

“He won't want to talk with me, Tonks. He's got friends that will be there to help him. I'll just remind him of what he's lost,” Lupin proclaimed.

“Don't be daft, old man. Harry needs you now more than ever. Sure he's got his friends to help him, but he needs you more than he needs them. None of his friends were that close to Sirius, and they won't have a clue as to what he's going through or how to help. They're just kids; they don't know what it's like to lose someone close to you. You've been there before, and you're going through it again.

Help him. Help each other. You may find you need him just as much as he does you,” Tonks encouraged.

Harry sat stunned as Lupin brooded over Tonks’ words. ‘How could I have been so selfish?’ Harry silently castrated himself. ‘He’s now lost the last of his friends, for the second time at that, and all I’ve thought of is myself.’ Harry had to fight the urge to rush over and comfort the man as he continued to sulk.

“How has Harry been taking it?” Lupin finally asked quietly. By the look on his face, Harry could tell that he wasn’t sure he really wanted to know the answer to his question.

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” Tonks replied with a sigh. “The first few days with his relatives, there didn’t seem to be any movement at all in his room.” She paused as though considering how to continue. “Then one day he’s moving about like everything is normal. He does close his shades quite a bit though, which makes it harder to tell what he’s up to. Makes me wonder if he knows we’re watching him.”

“I’m sure he knows. After last summer how could he not know?” Lupin asked sourly.

Tonks continued on as if he hadn’t said anything. “Several days ago he started running and working out in the mornings. I always get stuck with that shift, so I have to run with him in my invisibility cloak, which is not an easy task mind you.” Tonks paused again to think over her words carefully. “It’s strange, really. He seems like he’s ok. I’m worried that he might just be suppressing everything and not really confronting his feelings, maybe even pretending that he’s not really dead.”

Harry felt his chest constrict. Ever since his godfather had begun visiting his dreams, he had not really thought about the fact that Sirius was still dead. He was responsible for Sirius’ death, and lots of people were suffering as a result. He resolved to write to Remus as soon as he returned to Privet Drive.

Harry stumbled away from the bar and out of the pub, his hunger long forgotten. He wandered the streets aimlessly for several minutes, jostled constantly by the stream of shoppers now pouring out of shops and heading every which way to their new destinations. His desire to shop had also left him, so Harry stepped off to the side of the street to avoid the hustle and bustle of the crowd. He soundlessly disappeared from Diagon Alley and rematerialized in his room at Number 4 Privet Drive.

After spending several minutes staring unseeingly at a blank piece of parchment on his desk, Harry realized his restless mind would be unable to concentrate on anything at the moment. He needed something to help clear his mind and settle his nerves. The way he saw it, he was left with two options: owl or panther.

He apparated to the outskirts of Hogsmeade again and quickly took to the sky in his owl form. The sun was bright in the virtually cloudless sky. Harry quickly located the railway that the Hogwarts Express uses to transport the students to and from school.

He followed the tracks for several miles until he found what he was looking for. He was surrounded by open fields, green grass everywhere he looked. There was not a human being in sight. He angled himself into a dive and pulled up at the last possible second so that he was flying swiftly, level with the ground only a few feet below. He made the transition into panther straight from his owl form and didn't miss a stride as he galloped through the green fields.

The world was Harry's playground. He ran every which way, chasing everything and nothing. He left the path of the Hogwarts Express and traveled through the countryside not caring which direction he headed nor where he would end up.

After over an hour, Harry found a nice large oak tree and plopped down in the shade panting from exhaustion. He found himself compelled to hunt as his earlier hunger seemed to have caught up with him. His animal instincts longed for him to catch at least a small animal to feed on; his human self, meanwhile, was sickened at the thought of eating raw meat straight off an animal's corpse.

Tired of arguing with himself, Harry reverted back to human form and apparated to the Dursleys'. He ducked out of his room to the kitchen to get some food. As he walked through the hall he glanced through the open door and jumped, startled momentarily by the image that greeted him in the mirror of the bathroom. A blond haired boy with brown eyes reflected back to him.

"I can't believe I forgot to change myself back" Harry quietly chastised himself. "If the Dursleys saw me like this, they would freak." He slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. After taking the color off his hair, Harry removed the brown contact lenses and placed his glasses back on. He thought he rather liked his hair long, but he wouldn't be able to explain the sudden increase in length to any muggles, so he decided he would have to let it grow the natural way.

Now that Harry thought about it, though, his hair didn't ever grow. He hadn't had a haircut since before he started attending Hogwarts when his aunt had shaved the hair off his head save for the fringe to cover his scar. The next morning his hair had all grown back to its usual length, and she had never tried to cut his hair again.

Harry focused hard on his hair and felt his magic flowing atop his scalp. He willed the hair to become shorter and shorter, then longer again. It worked. He had control over the length of his hair. He decided to leave it slightly longer than it normally was for now, and he would just increase the length a little bit every day until he was happy with it.

Harry looked at himself in the mirror again. He debated whether or not he should keep the glasses or switch to his clear contacts, but he decided that he didn't want to have to explain them to anybody yet. He would wait until he left the Dursleys before he switched to contacts for good. Satisfied with his appearance, Harry left the bathroom and resumed his trek to the kitchen.

After scarfing down a quick lunch, Harry returned to his bedroom and sat at his desk. He found the blank piece of parchment he had left lying there earlier and his quill and ink. He dipped the quill into the ink bottle and began to write.

Dear Professor Lupin,

Hi. I realized today that I have never written to you before, and for that I am sorry. During my third year with you teaching at Hogwarts, I felt close to you and closer to my parents by extension. I had never met a friend of theirs before. You were there for me when I needed you, and I can never thank you enough.

When Sirius came along, I lost sight of the bond we had formed. He represented a chance for a different, better life, and he was yet another connection to my parents. But now he is gone. I'm so sorry. I've spent a lot of time feeling sorry for myself and feeling guilty for what happened. I know Sirius' death doesn't really lie on my hands, but I cannot help feeling responsible. I'm not arrogant enough to try to take all the blame; I know there is plenty to go around. But I still feel like I have my own share to carry.

I spent all that time thinking only of myself without ever thinking about how his death had affected anyone else. What I'd most like to say to you is that I'm sorry that you lost your best friend, and I'm sorry for the hand that I played in everything that happened. I can't imagine how you must feel, having already lost him once, but I want you to know that you don't have to go through it alone. If you feel up to it, I'd like to talk to you about everything: Sirius, my parents, your time at Hogwarts, life in general, or whatever else might come up.

I don't think it would be a good idea to meet at the Dursleys' since they hate everything magical, especially magical people. They've been tolerable so far this summer, but I don't think they would take too kindly to a wizard visitor. There is a park nearby where we could talk. If you would like to meet, let me know when to meet you. My calendar is pretty open right now since I'm stuck here with nothing to do all summer, so whenever works for you would be fine. I look forward to hearing from you.

Take care,

Harry

He read through the letter once and smiled inwardly. He really hoped this would help cheer his old professor up. The man had looked awful in the pub today, and Harry hoped he could do something to lift his spirits. He couldn't believe that Professor Lupin thought that Harry wouldn't want to talk to him. Harry rolled up the parchment and tied it to Hedwig's leg asking her to deliver it to him right away.

His owl gave him a hoot to acknowledge his request before taking off out of his bedroom window. With that taken care of and his nerves finally settled, Harry took out his new trunk and enlarged it. He retrieved one of his new Defense Against the Dark Arts books and began reading.

OoOoO

Harry was a bit distracted that night while he was dueling with his godfather. He kept thinking of Professor Lupin in the bar and wanted to talk to Sirius about it, but he wasn't sure how to bring it up. Sirius must have noticed something was amiss because he called for Harry to stop and asked "Alright, what's on your mind?"

Harry met his godfather's gaze momentarily before examining the floor carefully. "Was I that obvious?"

"Well...yes, you were" Sirius replied with a smirk.

"It's Moony..." Harry replied despondently.

At his friend's pet name (pun shamelessly intended), Sirius' eyebrows quirked upward. "Oh?" was all he uttered.

"I saw him at the Leaky Cauldron today," Harry explained. "He didn't look so well. Tonks was there as well, keeping him company and trying to cheer him up. She's worried about him, and they're both worried about me. He seemed almost lifeless." After a slight pause he added, "I wrote to him today asking if he'd like to meet me and talk about everything."

Sirius' expression almost matched the face that Lupin had worn in the pub hearing of the state of his friend. "That was good of you to do," he finally replied after several tense moments of silence. "Moony's strong. He lost all of us once before, but he pulled through. He has a tendency to try to handle things alone, defense mechanism he picked up living his life as a werewolf. Having someone to lean on and, more importantly, having someone who will lean on him will be good for him."

"I hope you're right," Harry replied with a sad smile. "I feel bad that I never thought of how he was dealing with everything sooner. First I was too caught up in my own grief and guilt, then you came along and I began training, and I just didn't really give it much more thought after that."

Sirius sighed "I was afraid of that. Look, I know this is hard, but you still need to come to terms with the fact that I am dead, even though I'm visiting you in your dreams every night. Eventually I will move on and won't be able to visit you any more, and I don't want you to fall apart when that happens."

Harry's eyes moistened as he surveyed his godfather. "I don't want to lose you again," he choked out.

Sirius quickly closed the gap between them and enveloped Harry in a hug. "I know Harry. I know," was all the man could say. He stood there holding Harry for a few minutes rubbing the young man's back soothingly. He pulled away to look his godson in the eye "We still have this time together, and you'll have time to accept what's to come. I just don't think you should lose sight of the fact that I am dead and one day will be gone for good."

"I know you're right," Harry said. "I'll try not to forget."

Sirius gave him another brief hug before asking "You ready to get back to work?"

"Yeah. Yeah, let's do it."

OoOoO

When Harry returned from his morning workout, he found Hedwig waiting for him with a letter. He opened it up and read the short message.

Dear Harry,

I would like to see you very much. Meet me in the place you mentioned today at 2:00. It meant a lot that you thought to write to me.

With regard,

Remus Lupin

Harry couldn't help but smile despite the nature of the visit. He was really looking forward to seeing his old professor again. He set the note aside and pulled out the book he had begun reading the previous night. He spent the rest of the morning buried under his newly acquired library, only taking a break when his stomach reminded him to eat lunch.

As it drew nearer to 2:00, Harry felt as if he was studying the clock at least as much as he was his book. He was anxious and nervous about his meeting with his former professor. Finally, at quarter to 2:00, Harry marked his place and shut his book. He put the book back in his trunk, shrunk the trunk, then slipped it into his pocket. He didn't want to take any chances with his new possessions. He didn't want anybody to know that he had bought any of them.

He left the house unnoticed by the Dursleys. They hadn't been paying Harry much attention at all this summer. It was easier for them to ignore Harry than it was to be civil with him. The sky was overcast with dark gray clouds looming over him in all directions as he walked to the park. He hoped that it would not rain this afternoon, at least not while he was still out with Professor Lupin. He passed over Magnolia Crescent and onto Magnolia Road and continued his trek. He ignored the few residents giving him scathing looks as he passed by their homes.

Soon enough Harry was entering through the gates of the park. He looked around but did not see his old professor anywhere. With a shrug he began ambling through the park for lack of anything better to do. As he passed by an empty bench a disembodied voice startled him "Harry."

Harry jumped into action as he whipped out his wand and rolled to the side. With his wand leveled toward the empty bench, Harry looked around for the source of the noise. "It's me, Harry," his former professor said as he removed his invisibility cloak and appeared before him.

"Merlin! Don't do that to me," Harry said as the man extended his hand for Harry to shake. Harry clasped his hand and encircled his old professor with his other hand to give him a backslapping hug.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," he replied. "But I must say I'm impressed with your reaction. Moody would sure be proud."

"It's alright. Just be glad I didn't hex first and ask questions later. The last thing I need right now is another letter from the ministry about under age magic use," Harry shot back with a grin knowing that any spell he shot would not have actually come from his wand, making it untraceable by the ministry. But he had to keep up the guise that he was unable to perform magic at the moment.

"Point taken," was Lupin's only reply as he guided Harry over to the bench where the two of them sat down.

For several minutes neither one said anything as they traded off studying each other and their surroundings. Finally Lupin broke the silence. "So how have you been holding up?" he asked.

"I'm okay," Remus made to interrupt but Harry held up his hand and continued. "Really. The first few days back here I was a wreck. I didn't eat, didn't sleep, didn't really move much at all. I spent all day and night lying in bed staring at nothing at all. But then I decided that brooding all day long wouldn't solve anything and that Sirius wouldn't want me to be taking it so hard. So I decided to do something with

myself. Ever since then I've been doing a lot of studying, and I recently started jogging and working out in the morning. I'm finished with all the summer homework that was assigned for the classes I'm planning on taking next term. I've just been going through all my old text books picking up anything I might have missed."

"Sounds like you've been keeping pretty busy," Lupin commented.

"Yeah, you could say that. I just needed to do something. I'm sick of being left here cooped up in my room all day, so I started studying. That left me feeling restless, so I began training physically as well. That night made me realize dueling is as much physical as it is magical. I'll need all the edge I can get next time, so while I can't practice with my wand here, the physical training will have to suffice." Harry hated lying about the magical training he had been doing, but he just couldn't risk telling anybody. Not yet, anyway.

"That's very insightful, Harry," his old professor encouraged. "You may be onto something there."

"I'm thinking about incorporating some physical training in the DA this year as well," Harry continued. "I'm not sure how I'll fit it in, but I think it's important. I need to start planning what I'm going to be teaching and how it will work so I can present it to Professor Dumbledore. I've got to go over some things with Hermione as well. She was the real brains behind it last year."

"You're going to keep teaching the DA?" Remus inquired. "Even with Umbridge gone?"

"Yeah. Even if they manage to find a good teacher, they'll still need all the training they can get, especially with the lack of consistent teaching over the years. In five years there, I've only had three acceptable teachers, and two of them tried to kill me. I already asked for permission to run it as a school club with me as the leader and was granted it. Only the details need to be worked out now, and we've got all summer for that," Harry explained.

“Indeed,” Remus replied with a thoughtful expression. “I think it’s great that you’ve found all this stuff to keep yourself busy with, but I’m worried about you, Harry. It does not do to dwell on things you cannot change, but it is perhaps worse to ignore them or pretend that they never happened. I’m worried you might be doing that here.”

Harry sighed. “I know what you’re talking about Professor, but...”

“Harry,” Remus interrupted, “it’s been several years since I’ve been your professor. Please just call me Remus.”

“Alright...Remus,” Harry tested the name. “That’s gonna take some getting used to. I will admit keeping busy does help me take my mind off of S-Sirius” Harry stumbled over his godfather’s name. “I know that he’s dead and that nothing will ever change that. And I’m sorry I cost you your best friend.”

“Don’t say that Harry,” Remus soothed, putting a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Don’t ever even think that. It wasn’t your fault. Any one of us would have done the same thing in your shoes.”

“Not Hermione,” Harry dead panned. “She knew how foolish I was being and tried to talk me out of it. She warned me that I had a ‘saving people thing,’ but I wouldn’t listen. Then she came along anyway and got hurt because of me.”

“Hermione is...” Remus took a moment to choose his words carefully. “Hermione is the type of person to analyze a problem from all angles before attempting a solution. Sometimes that’s what you need in a situation, but other times you need quick, decisive action. Hermione would be left at a disadvantage there because she would refuse to act on her own without all of the information. If Sirius really had been taken and Hermione had been left to decide the course of action, you never would have left Hogwarts in time to make any difference. You may not have made it out of Hogwarts at all.”

Remus continued “In this case that would have been the best course of action but only because Sirius was not in any danger. Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20. Next time it could be your quick action that saves

lives versus Hermione's less risky, analytical ways. As you grow older and more experienced, you'll learn to tell which type of action fits each situation better, but nobody is infallible."

"Right," Harry replied with forced confidence. He then asked "What about you? How have you been doing?"

Remus let out a long breath before admitting "Not so good. It was hard losing my friends the first time around. James, Lily, and Peter dead with Sirius their betrayer. When I got Sirius back a huge weight had lifted off my shoulders, but now I've lost him again. And I know that I'll never get any of them back ever again. It will only get worse when the next full moon hits. Having Padfoot there helped calm the wolf down."

"Could I help?" Harry blurted out before he realized what he was saying.

"What do you mean?" Remus questioned, studying Harry carefully.

Harry had to think fast. 'How could I be so stupid?' he berated himself. "Do you promise not to tell anyone?"

"Sure Harry, if that's what you'd like," Remus responded.

"Not even Dumbledore?" Harry shot back.

Remus gazed at Harry penetratingly. "What's this about Harry?"

"Only after you promise," Harry replied seriously.

"Okay," Remus sighed. "I promise I won't tell a soul. Now don't make me regret this."

"I've been practicing to become an animagus," Harry said quietly.

"What? When? How?" Remus spluttered.

“Sirius...” Harry slowly explained. “He got me started over the Christmas holidays. He gave me the potion and told me everything I would need to know. He even told me a couple books he and my dad had used at Hogwarts that might help,” Harry fabricated, impressed with his ability to make this up on the fly.

“How come he never mentioned anything?” Remus asked. “Or you for that matter?”

“We wanted to keep it a secret, something just between the two of us,” Harry made up. “He didn’t think many people would approve.”

“I see,” Remus paused taking in this new information. “So what’s your form then?”

Harry quickly decided to go with “Panther” since that would be the form that would help most in keeping Moony company during the full moons.

“And how far along are you?” Remus questioned.

Harry considered this for a moment before answering. “Well before the year ended I was able to do partial transformations for all of my limbs and most of the rest of my body. I had meant to give the full transformation a shot before summer started, but with everything that happened I never got around to it. Now that I’m here I can’t try without getting kicked out of Hogwarts.”

“I’m impressed,” Remus said. “Do your friends know about this?”

“Not a one,” Harry replied evenly.

“I thought for sure you’d share something like this with Ron and Hermione,” Remus said with some surprise. “You three are so close.”

“It was something that just Sirius and I shared,” Harry said carefully.

“Ah, say no more. Thank you for sharing this with me, Harry.” Remus paused to consider something before continuing. “If I share a secret with you, will you promise not to tell anyone that you heard it from me?”

“Of course,” Harry replied without even needing to consider.

“The ministry can only track magic performed with your wand. So if you were so inclined,” Remus told Harry, “you could continue your animagus training over the summer.”

“Really?” Harry asked in mock surprise. “That’s great.”

“But I want you to be extra careful if you decide to give it a try, and it wouldn’t be a good idea if others knew you were trying,” cautioned Remus.

“Right, I’ll be careful,” replied Harry.

“Let me know if you manage a full transformation, then we’ll discuss if and how you’ll keep me company on full moons,” Remus said. “If you want to maintain your secret, we may have to wait until school starts to plan this. I just want you to know that it really means a lot that you’d share your secret with me, Harry, and that you want to help me with my transformations.”

“Prof – Remus, it’s the least I can do...”

“No, Harry,” Remus interrupted, “it’s a lot more than that. Thank you.” He choked out as he put his arm around Harry’s shoulder. “I know I can never replace Sirius, but I would like you to know that I will always be there for you if you should ever need me.”

“Thank you, Remus” Harry said through a stifled sob. “I’d like it if we could meet like this more often.”

“I’d like that too,” Remus replied with a small smile. “How about we try to meet once every week or two? We shouldn’t meet at regular

times, best to change it up every time. Moody would have my head otherwise. I'll let you know the date and time of the next time I'll be able to come see you. I'll wait for you under my invisibility cloak at one of the benches, so just walk around like you did today until I call for you, ok?"

"Sounds like a plan," Harry replied.

Remus sighed. "I should get going, Harry. Take care of yourself. I'll send you an owl sometime soon for our next meeting."

"Okay Remus," Harry said. "Thanks for coming, and be careful."

"You got it," he replied as he rose to his feet and embraced Harry once more. "Until next time." And with a pop Remus was gone.

Harry began his walk back to the Dursleys' and thought over his conversation with Remus. He had given away information he hadn't meant to, but he had done a pretty good job covering up his real summer time activities. It really felt good to have someone to talk to though, and he was glad he would be able to help Remus, especially when the full moon came around. Harry hadn't thought about it, but Sirius had probably stayed with Moony each full moon since he had been back in England after his escape on Buckbeak in Harry's third year. Harry was determined that Moony not suffer through his transformations alone.

The next several days passed by in his normal routine. He made a small dent in his new library and was becoming increasingly proficient in his wandless casting. He found that if he practiced any new spells at night with Sirius to get a feel for the spell, he could easily pick up the wandless casting for it the next day. He moved much of his wandless casting inside of his trunk, to avoid being caught.

He was also beginning to increase in the speed with which he was able to cast spells. It only took him half a second to build up his magic and form it correctly before casting his spell. And he was increasing the speed in which he could cast multiple spells one after the other. He found that he was just as quick if not a little quicker without the

wand than with it. He still practiced with his wand against Sirius, though, because he wanted to be used to using it for when he got back to school. He didn't want to slip up and showcase his new abilities for the whole school to see.

As Harry made his way through books, he took notes of any spells he thought would be useful to use in the DA. He kept a list and a short description of each spell in a notebook he had found in his room. Towards the end of the summer he would take his list and organize it into the order in which he would teach the spells.

In the back of his mind, Harry kept reminding himself that he needed to write up the magical contract for the DA and that he should consult Hermione about it. He had skimmed through the book he had bought on the subject, but he wanted to know as much as possible about magical contracts before he began working on it. He finally made himself sit down and write her a letter.

Dear Hermione,

I need your help. I know that must come as a huge shock to you. I am going to continue teaching the DA next year, only it will be a club open to all students 4th year and up. There will be a requirement that every member sign a magical contract saying that they won't discuss the DA with any non-members and that they will not use anything I teach them to help Voldemort or the Death Eaters.

I would like your help with the contract. It needs to be more than the one you had everybody sign last year. For one thing, if anybody is insincere or planning on breaking the rules of the contract, they would be unable to sign their name in the first place. But then I was hoping to find a way to stop people from accidentally mentioning it in front of other people, kind of like how the Fidelius Charm works with the secret keeper being the only one capable of disclosing the secret. And of course there needs to be suitable punishment if either clause is violated. Any thoughts you have on this would be greatly appreciated. I managed to get my hands on one book on the subject, but I was hoping you might know a little more. I need to present the contract before Dumbledore and have him approve all the subject material.

Have you talked to your parents about everything yet? I was thinking it might be a good idea to have some support to help explain everything. I know I won't be allowed to come talk to your parents, but one of the Weasleys would be an ideal candidate or Remus. I met with Remus last week, and we've decided to meet up and talk on a regular basis from now on. It's nice to actually have some contact with the wizarding world beyond owls for once. Let me know how your summer is going. Keep in touch.

Take care,

Harry

After Harry sent Hedwig off with the letter, he returned to his studies. He had turned into somewhat of a machine, it seemed. He spent his entire day studying, practicing spells, improving his wandless abilities, physically training, and training in his animal forms. He spent the majority of each night training with Sirius in his dreams.

Sirius helped him while he was learning knew spells and also served as his dueling partner. His godfather was still the superior dueler, but Harry's skills were improving dramatically. Harry was getting faster and stronger, both physically and magically. He was able to dodge curses while hurling hexes of his own, his shields were able to deflect anything Sirius threw at him, and his reflexes were as sharp as ever.

Prior to this training, Harry had not been accustomed to an all out duel. The way it had always been done in classes had been with opponents alternating shots and shields. In a real duel nothing was so formal. You could volley hexes back and forth or one person could release a barrage of curses one after the other. Harry was still getting used to this aspect of battle, but he was improving every night. He had finally managed to best his godfather the previous night. Sirius had been a mix of happiness and pride in his godson and anger at himself for having been beaten by a fifteen year old. Harry could tell that Sirius had been very proud of him despite his confused emotions.

He began reading his books on Occlumency today, spurred to do so after his first Voldemort related experience of the summer the

previous night. His scar had not bothered him at all since their encounter in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. He assumed Voldemort had been lying low since his return was finally being acknowledged by the ministry. Last night Harry had been training with Sirius as was normal when he was suddenly ripped from the classroom.

When he was able to orient himself, Harry found himself in a dark, dank cavern surrounded by figures robed in black, faces covered by masks. He had sat upon a rough throne hewn from stone. As he stood up to address his followers, they fell as one to their knees in a bow. "My loyal followers, tonight our number grows. I have called in our faithful servants from Azkaban, and with them come your brothers who were recently captured."

Voldemort paused as a muttering spread through the crowd. "Silence! We have been careful thus far, discreet in our movements to avoid notice. Now the world knows I have returned. They no doubt expect us to make ourselves more public, to spread terror and chaos throughout the land. And we will. Yes, we will. In time. Now is the time to gather up our allies, to build up our numbers. While the world expects us to strike out, we will build up our strength. And just when they let their guard down, we have our coming out party. After all, we wouldn't want to deny the world a chance to celebrate our glorious return. Once we have properly announced our presence to the world, the dark mark will once more light up the skies, striking fear into the hearts of the Wizarding World. And you, my followers, will be allowed to enjoy yourselves torturing and killing muggles, mudbloods, and muggle-lovers. We will show the world the superiority of pure blood."

"Ah, it would seem our guests have arrived," Voldemort commented as several Death Eaters entered. "Welcome. I trust your stay in Azkaban was pleasant. Tell me, how is it that 12 Death Eaters were unable to overcome half a dozen school children?" Voldemort asked in mock calm.

"My lord," Lucius Malfoy answered, stepping forward, "we were trying to protect the prophecy. We could not strike the Potter boy for fear of destroying it."

“That would explain how Potter eluded your grasp, Lucius, but tell me, how is it you were unable to capture one of the other five children running around? Surely you must have realized that Potter would have traded the prophecy had you captured just one of his friends.”

“My lord, it was not that easy. Potter was constantly threatening...”

“Silence! I have heard enough of your pathetic excuses,” Voldemort raged. “Do not fail me again, Lucius, or you will find the consequences most severe. Potter and his friends will pay. Now I will tell you the same thing I told Bella: Crucio!” A blast of pain shot through Harry’s scar as Malfoy dropped to the ground, writhing in agony. Voldemort continued to torture each of the Death Eaters who had been captured at the Ministry. Harry awoke sometime during the torture session in a cold sweat, scar searing in pain.

He spent the next several minutes curled up in a ball on his bed, clutching at his forehead. Eventually the pain began to subside and Harry was able to think clearly and process what he had just witnessed. Harry wondered whether or not he should inform the headmaster of this latest vision. There was nothing conclusive given, but it couldn’t hurt to let him know.

He was sure that Dumbledore would soon know about the breakout in Azkaban if he didn’t know already. But the threat of impending attacks weighed in on Harry’s mind, so he decided to write a letter right away. He stumbled out of bed and over to his desk where he had found a piece of parchment he could use and pulled out his quill and ink to write.

Sir,

Had vision. Prison breakout, Dementors gone. Voldemort laying low for a bit, planning something big before the attacks start.

HP

The letter had been short and to the point, but given the subject matter and the fact that it was early in the morning, Harry hadn't really cared. He had tried to go back to sleep after sending the letter off with Hedwig, but his mind was too preoccupied to allow him rest. He wondered what his godfather was thinking about his sudden disappearance. Harry figured Sirius would assume that he simply woke up unexpectedly.

While lying in bed, he was reminded of how his previous visions of Voldemort had turned out for him and decided not to wait for Snape's Occlumency lessons. Which is how he found himself now pouring through Occlumency: Shield Your Mind. Unsurprisingly, he found the subject to be much more in depth than Snape's simple instruction to "Clear your mind." There were several different methods outlined, but the best explanation Harry had seen thus far told readers to think of their minds as a castle or fortress.

This fortress would be like a city with all the inhabitants and their homes and possessions being his thoughts and memories. The people who were considered less significant would be close to the city walls or even outside of them. These would have hardly any protection. The majority of the people would be within the city walls and would be protected from intruders.

No fortress is completely impregnable, so the most important people would be towards the center of the city housed in a castle with its own protections surrounding it. Should anyone break into the city, they would be bombarded and fought back the minute they stepped foot inside. They would hopefully be expelled before ever reaching the castle in the middle of the city. If they did reach the castle, the intruder would have to break through its defenses while holding off the attack from the rest of the city making the castle all but impossible to break into if you're a gifted Occlumens.

The key, Harry found, was not so much clearing your mind but organizing it. When a Legilimens first attacks, he will only have access to the most trivial thoughts and memories if he breaks through your outer shield, allowing the Occlumens time to expel the intruder without becoming distracted by the memories being viewed.

And so Harry decided that the first step towards mastering Occlumency would be to organize his mind. So he decided to take a few hours every day to sift through his memories and organize them. To help with the process, Harry imagined several different trunks in his mind. He put different labels on each trunk to put similar memories in each one. Each trunk could also have different compartments to further divide his memories into subcategories. School had its own trunk with each of his classes and teachers having their own compartment. Friends was another trunk with each of his good friends getting their own compartment, he put the DA members into another compartment, and other classmates into another.

He created a trunk for enemies which included compartments for Voldemort, Death Eaters, Draco Malfoy, other Slytherins who have sided with Draco or Voldemort, Snape, Fudge/Umbridge/other ministry idiots, and other miscellaneous foes.

He made a trunk for the Order with compartments for Dumbledore, Remus, Tonks, Moody, other members, and Order information and secrets. He made a trunk for family, both good and bad. The Dursleys comprised one compartment, his parents another, Sirius had one, and the Weasleys had a compartment. There was also a trunk for miscellaneous pre-Hogwarts memories that ranged from bad to worse.

And he made other various trunks as was needed. It would be a hard process for anybody to go through all their past memories and organize them, but for one who had a lot of bad memories without too many good ones to counteract them, it was a grueling process. Harry was noticeably distressed during this time, and his godfather picked up on it during their nightly sessions.

The organization of his mind lasted for several days, and his training with Sirius was virtually on pause during that time. Sirius had decided it was more important to comfort and reassure his godson during that time than to continue dueling. The boy had been through so much in his young life and had shouldered so many burdens on his own; it was time to try to lighten his load a bit. Sirius asked the questions that he had shied away from when he was alive about Harry's childhood,

the Dursleys, some of his rougher times at Hogwarts when so many people had turned their backs on him, his parents, and anything else that came up.

Harry also met with Remus again during this time. The perceptive werewolf had picked up on Harry's mood as well. He took it to mean that Harry was finally really facing Sirius' death and comforted him as best he could. Harry felt really guilty about misleading Remus, but used the situation to his advantage to sell his grief to his former professor. He knew that everyone expected him to be taking Sirius' death badly, but seeing his godfather every night made it so much easier to forget the pain. But with Harry looking as bad as he did at this time, it made it that much easier to hide his nighttime activities from others.

When Harry finished organizing his memories, he knew he wasn't done with them. He had been suppressing so much for so long, and he was not naïve enough to think that he was over his past, but there were more important things to do now. So he pushed all that aside, trapped in the trunks in his mind for the time being. With all of his memories so organized and stored away, Harry found it much easier to control his emotions and thought processes. He could prevent himself from thinking about certain things if he wanted to, and it wasn't hard to squash any emotions he wasn't ready to deal with by just locking them up and the thoughts and memories that were causing them.

Now that everything was sorted out, it was time to learn how to protect his mind and memories. He read more of the book and found different analogies of how to protect the mind. Physical barriers were one example, while another example likened the process to setting up wards to protect a home or possession. Given Voldemort's strength, Harry decided it was probably best to cover all fronts. He didn't know anything about wards yet, but he had bought a book about them from Diagon Alley. That would be the next book to devour.

In the meantime, Harry imagined setting up physical barriers. He imagined his mind to be encased in steel walls on all sides, the ceiling and floor both steel as well. He then imagined his trunks being

reinforced with steel as well. After he felt like he had done all he could with physical barriers, he decided to start reading on wards.

That was how Harry found himself reading through Magical Protection: Standard Wards for the Home today. Harry had been using his assignment notebook that Hermione had given him to help him keep notes to himself and keep track of the days. As he was adding a note to himself he realized the date: July 30th.

Harry realized that it was Neville's birthday. He decided that he would write a quick note to his friend to wish him a happy birthday. He wished he had thought of it sooner so he could have gotten the boy a gift, but he would have to make due with just a homemade birthday card. He set aside his book and pulled out parchment and quill to begin writing.

Dear Neville,

Happy Birthday, mate. I wish I wasn't stuck with my muggle relatives, or I might have been able to get you something. I don't know if you ever realized this, but our birthdays are only a day apart. Kind of funny how despite that, this day could still sneak up on me. But the Dursleys never celebrated my birthday, so it's never been a big deal for me, which has made it easy to forget about it.

I hope your summer is going well. I've been keeping busy studying. I've been coming up with new lessons for the DA this year. That's right, the DA will be back. It'll be open to new members and officially sanctioned by the school, so we won't have to sneak around the school all the time any more. You'll hear all the details about it when we get to school.

Well I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday. I hope your day goes well.

Take care,

Harry

Harry walked over to his owl and gave her the letter to deliver to his friend. It was never a strange sight to see Harry talking to his owl at Privet Drive; she was, after all, the only friend he had in the house. Ever since he had found he could talk to Hedwig, he would occasionally change to his owl form and chat with his snowy white feathered friend. He also tried to imitate their mind speak in his human form, but had not found any success yet. He told Hedwig to deliver the note to Neville and that it was the boy's birthday. He wished her a safe flight and saw her out the window.

Harry turned back to his book and buried himself in it. He found a lot of wards that would not help his current problem, but that he read up on regardless because he was genuinely interested in learning more about them. There were anti-apparation, anti-portkey, anti-muggle, and confounding wards. There were wards that would prevent entrance to anyone except in a certain location designated as the gate. There were wards that you could key to certain people to specifically prohibit their entrance. There were also age specific wards like the age line that Dumbledore had used with the Goblet of Fire in Harry's fourth year.

There were a few different wards to create different kinds of silent spaces. One kind would block any sound from leaving the enclosed area but would allow sound to enter, another kind would block sound from entering the enclosed area but allow sound to leave it, and the last ward would block sound from both entering and leaving the enclosed area. There was an imperturbable ward that would prevent anything, living or non-living, from crossing through the barrier.

Harry found that the strength of a ward is equal to the amount of magic poured into it. Long lasting wards can be regularly reinforced to increase the strength of it. That's why such long-standing buildings like Hogwarts were considered to be so safe, because their wards had been active for so long and were constantly being reinforced. In order to break through a ward, one would have to pour as much magic into breaking it as was currently active in strengthening it. But wards naturally deteriorate over time, so if any wards were not regularly strengthened, they would be rather easy to break through.

The book stated that there was a way to amplify wards by keying them into a gemstone. Using different gemstones to house the wards would increase the lifetime of a ward by lessening the amount that the wards weaken over time. It mentioned that many studies have been done on how different stones affect different types of wards and how the size and quality of the stone can affect things as well, but it did not go into any details in the subject. It was just a book on the basics, after all.

Harry found himself very interested in the subject of wards. Hogwarts was considered one of the safest places in the world, yet he had found his life in danger several times throughout his five year career there. He wondered what wards were in place at Hogwarts and how they were protecting students. He wondered how these wards had failed to protect him and his classmates so many times.

Before he went to sleep that night, he imagined placing some of the newly learned wards in his mind. He placed an imperturbable ward around his entire mind space to prevent anyone on the outside from entering. Putting wards up in your mind wasn't exactly the same as it was casting the wards in real life. It was more of an analogy of sorts. You cannot cast magic in your mind, but you can will things to happen a certain way. So Harry just had to will a force field to be erected around his mind for it to happen. He also put a field over each of the trunks in his mind that would allow only him access to them.

That night Harry and Sirius only spent half of their time together training. After a time Sirius called for a halt, and they spent the rest of the night chatting away about anything and nothing. Sirius told Harry that it was his birthday present, since he couldn't actually give him any gifts. He told Harry that his parents, James and Lily, had asked him to wish their son a happy birthday for them. Harry had smiled, eyes glistening with unshed tears, thinking that hearing that was better than any present anyway.

Harry awoke in high spirits. He made a conscious decision to enjoy the day. He locked away all negative thoughts and memories and concentrated only on good things. He jumped into his regular morning routine and threw on some jogging clothes. The sun was low in the

sky but bright and cheerful. There were light, scattered white clouds, but the sky was mostly a soft shade of blue. Summer was in full swing. It was warm out, but not unbearably hot at this time of the morning. Harry broke out into his jog to the sound of birds cheerfully chirping in the trees lining the sidewalk.

He had recently taken to keeping an eye and an ear out for Tonks, whom he had overheard telling Remus she always got stuck running after him under her invisibility cloak. He had on several occasions managed to locate Tonks as she trailed after him; she could be quite clumsy even in the best of circumstances, so running around under an invisibility cloak was an invitation to disaster.

Harry noticed that today Tonks was trailing behind him on the sidewalk. Being in the spirited mood he was in, he decided to have a little fun with the goofy auror. He was rounding a corner with a particularly high hedge lining the edge. When he made the turn he jumped off the sidewalk into the hedge and held still listening carefully for the sound of her footsteps. Seconds later he heard her approaching, and just as she was rounding the corner Harry reached out and plucked the invisibility cloak off of her head.

“Wotcher, Tonks!” Harry greeted cheekily.

Tonks whirled around on the spot and clutched a hand to her chest. She was reaching for her wand when she noticed who her assailant was. “Blimey, Harry! You nearly gave me a heart attack,” Tonks complained. “What’s the big idea anyway? You trying to blow my cover?”

“Tonks, I’m hurt,” Harry responded clutching at his heart. “Here I am on my birthday, and you were content just to follow along in the shadows without coming out to wish me a happy day. I don’t know if I’ll ever recover.”

“Harry, you prat, you know I’m not allowed to reveal myself like that,” Tonks retorted, swinging a punch at his shoulder.

“Oh yes, heaven forbid you break protocol,” Harry teased.

“What’s got you so chipper this morning?” Tonks asked.

“Why it’s my birthday, my dear Tonks. Need I any other excuse?” Harry asked feigning hurt.

“So you think that since it’s your birthday you can just go and do whatever you want?” Tonks questioned.

“More or less,” Harry returned brightly.

“Alright, I’ll let you get away with your fun just this once,” she relented. “How did you spot me, anyway?”

“Oh I’ve known you’ve been following me for weeks. I’ve been keeping my eyes open and my ears too,” Harry grinned. “I’ve thought about springing a trap on you for awhile now, and today seemed like just the right day to go for it.”

“Moody would be so proud,” the young auror mock praised.

“As well he should be,” Harry said pompously, puffing out his chest, doing his best impression of Percy as he talked about his job. He shifted gears and asked her seriously, “So how have you been, Tonks?”

“I don’t know,” she started, then paused. “It’s been a hard month. I’ve been worried mostly, I guess, for you and Remus and everyone. I miss Sirius, but I never got a chance to know him very well. Sure he and my mom were cousins, but he was in jail for half of my life. I have a couple memories of him from when I was younger, then the past year. A death of anyone you know will always hit you hard.”

“I know what you mean,” Harry replied gravely. “The truth of the matter is that I didn’t know him that well either. I mean, I only had the past two years, and even those were mostly just sporadic letters. I only had half of last summer and the Christmas holidays at headquarters to really be with him. That was it.” Tonks put a hand on

his shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Harry gave her a sad smile in return. "It didn't really make it easier though. It only made me regret that we didn't get more time together and wish that there was some way for it to change."

"You just have to keep in mind all that you still have," Tonks interjected. "You've got a lot of people that care about you, Harry. You may not get along with your relatives, but you've still got a family, just not in blood."

"Yeah, you're right." Harry's full smile returned. "I've still got a lot to live for. Remus is the one I'm really worried about. He lost everybody once before, and now he's lost Sirius for the second time only two years after getting him back. I wish there was something more I could do for him."

"You're a good kid, Harry," Tonks said fondly. "You and Remus are good for each other. But don't you worry; I'm keeping my eye on him too. If he thinks he can get away with moping about, he's got another thing coming."

"Thanks Tonks. It's good to know someone's looking out for him."

"You can count on me, Harry," she said, flashing him a dazzling smile.

"Well, should we continue our morning jog?" Harry finally asked.

"After you," she replied.

Harry handed her back the invisibility cloak and turned to continue his jog when her voice caught him "Oh, and Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Happy birthday!"

“Thanks.” He gave her a bright smile before turning back and jogging away. Tonks slipped the cloak back over her head after making sure no one was watching. After a moment she continued after him.

Harry finished his jog and regular workout routine with a spring in his step. As he came back up to his room, he was greeted by a handful of owls bearing various parcels. Harry quickly went around relieving each owl of its burden. He offered each owl a treat and some water before finally turning to his small pile of packages.

Pig had delivered a present from Ron with a note attached. It was a short note wishing him a happy birthday and apologizing for getting mad at him for writing to Ginny. In a generous mood, Harry decided to forgive and forget and made a note to write a thank you to Ron. His friend had sent him a box of chocolate frogs and a poster of the Chudley Canons. Harry shook his head at his friend. Ron was utterly devoted to the Canons and seemed intent on making sure Harry was the same way.

An unfamiliar owl had brought him a somewhat weighty rectangular package with a note attached. Harry opened the letter first and found Hermione’s script on the page. She had wished him a happy birthday and told him that she hoped her present would help him. He tore open the packaging and, unsurprisingly, unearthed a book and a pamphlet. The book made him grin while the pamphlet caused him to huff in annoyance. The book she sent was to help him out with the magical contract for the DA. “The 5 Stages of Grief” pamphlet made Harry want to yell out in frustration. How could Hermione think a stupid little booklet would help in a situation like this?

Remembering his earlier vow to himself, he decided not to let it get to him and moved onto the next package. Another unfamiliar owl delivered a present from Remus. The note he sent asked him to meet him in the park today at 3:00. His former professor had sent him a book on defense and a wizarding photograph of himself, James, and Sirius. ‘The true marauders,’ Harry thought to himself. The photo was housed in a plain wooden frame. He decided to look up a charm to do engravings. He rather liked the title he had thought up.

A Hogwarts owl came bearing a gift from his half-giant friend, Hagrid. Harry hoped that Hagrid hadn't sent him any homemade food again. His friend meant well, but his food always ended up winning the battle against Harry's teeth. Harry tore open the package to find a dagger. He reckoned it was about a ten inch blade and had a dragon theme to it. A dragon coiled itself around the hilt of the small blade; its eyes sparkled with red sapphires. The sheath also had carvings of dragons on it. Hagrid always did love dragons.

Harry smiled at the gift. It was unconventional, sure, but it wouldn't have been a gift from Hagrid if it was normal. He didn't know how much use he'd get out of it, but Harry rather liked the gift. He looked at the note that was sent along with it written in Hagrid's messy scrawl. He had wished Harry a happy birthday and told him not to let his relatives bother him. He said that he had an interesting term lined up for the students this year which made Harry cringe. Hagrid's idea of interesting generally meant life-threatening to everyone else.

Errol had brought a package from Mrs. Weasley. Her cooking was legendary, and Harry was not disappointed to find homemade fudge and a small cake. Harry set it aside for the moment. After he opened all his presents he would put it in the fridge in his trunk to preserve the food.

The twins had also sent him an owl with a box full of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes products. Harry decided to hold off opening any of those just yet. He didn't fancy having anything explode in his face just yet. They had sent him a letter wishing him a happy birthday and telling him about their business plans. They were apparently opening a shop in Diagon Alley in September. They told him that as their financial supporter, Harry would own 10 of the company. Harry resolved to write them back to tell them that 10 was too much. If he thought they'd let him, he would have tried to talk them out of giving any of the company to him, but he knew he wouldn't get away with it, so he decided to try to talk them down to 5 instead.

Harry moved onto what his own owl, Hedwig, had brought him. The first was just a letter, a reply from Neville thanking him for his letter and wishing him a happy birthday in turn. Neville seemed really

excited about getting back into the DA. Harry smiled as he thought of his friend; Neville had really come a long way the previous year. After Bellatrix Lestrange, the woman who had tortured Neville's parents into insanity, escaped from Azkaban, he had found a new determination that quickly made him one of the most formidable duelers in the whole club.

Hedwig had also brought him a package with a note attached. Harry tore open the letter to find Ginny's handwriting sprawled across the parchment. She wished him a happy birthday telling him to do something silly today just because. Laughing, he thought to himself 'Already did that, Gin. Just ask Tonks.' He resolved to write her back to tell her about his ambush on the auror. He thought she'd get a kick out of that.

He opened up the package she'd sent which was rectangular in shape. He found a drawing framed in an elegant dark wooden frame with symbols unknown to Harry etched along its sides. To be honest Harry barely noticed the frame at all. The drawing had caught his attention and held it. A big, shaggy black dog was grinning at him in a way that no normal dog would ever be able to. But this wasn't any normal dog that had been drawn.

Padfoot was captured in all his glory. Harry was struck dumb at the sight. The drawing was magnificent. His godfather's animagus form was captured perfectly. His personality bled from the canvas. He bounded about a small orchard painted behind him. Harry didn't recognize the landscape, but that didn't matter to him. Padfoot's eyes sparkled with mischief. He wagged his tail spiritedly and lolled his tongue out of his mouth. He gave a silent bark at Harry, and Harry could almost hear it in his mind. The top of the frame had 'Padfoot' engraved across it in large letters. The bottom of the frame read: 'In loving memory of a dear friend.'

Tears streamed down Harry's face as he once again mourned the loss of his godfather. He hadn't thought much about his godfather's passing in quite some time since he saw the man every night in his dreams, but this painting made it all real for him for a moment. It was a fitting memorial for his godfather and friend. He didn't think anything else could capture his godfather's spirit as Ginny had done. He hadn't

even known she could draw. He reverentially placed it on the nightstand next to his bed and continued to gaze at it for another long minute before looking back to the rest of his gifts.

He picked up his new books and placed them with the rest of his library in his trunk. Harry kept his unread books in the regular storage compartments, but as he read through them he added the books to the bookshelves of the study in the trunk. So he slipped the books in with the rest of the unread ones, then gathered the dagger, food, and poster into the trunk. He put the food away and placed the dagger on a table in the living room. He wasn't sure what to do with it just yet. He stuffed the poster into a closet, not wanting to stare at the orange poster in the living room or bedroom.

Harry exited his trunk and returned to his bedroom. He decided that thank you's were in order, so he sat at his desk and began writing. Glancing at the drawing on the little table beside his bed, Harry began to write.

Dear Ginny,

Thank you. I can't tell you how much your gift means to me. I don't think anyone could have captured him better than you have. I could have sworn I was staring into his eyes. I can't thank you enough for the gift. I didn't even know you could draw, but you're very good. I'd like to see some of your other drawings some time, if you don't mind showing me.

Ron sent me the usual: candy and Canons merchandise. I don't have the heart to tell him that I could really care less about the Canons. I've never seen a single game of theirs. The only professional Quidditch I've ever seen was at the World Cup. I think he takes the fact that I don't badmouth the Canons like everyone else as a sign that I like them. I'm not really sure.

Hermione sent me books. Shocking, I know. Take a moment to calm down and get over your astonishment. One will be very useful. It's a book on magical contracts. I had asked for her help writing one up for the DA. I highly doubt the other book will be of much help to me, though. She sent me a booklet on the five stages of grief. How she

could think a book was what I would need to help me with it is beyond me, but that's Hermione for you.

Hagrid sent me a dagger with a dragon motif on the hilt and sheath. It's kind of cool, but I don't know what use I'll find for a dagger. At least it wasn't any of his home cooking though. I rather like my teeth whole. Remus (Professor Lupin) sent me a book on defense and a picture of him, my dad, and Sirius. I was thinking about engraving 'The True Marauders' into the frame, but I think I'll wait and have someone else do it for me as my hand writing is hardly legible.

Do you know about the marauders and all that? Sometimes I forget that while you've been around all these years you haven't necessarily been privy to all of our little secrets and everything we've done. Sometime this term we'll have to sit down together and catch up. I'm sure you've got a few stories you could share with me as well.

Anyway, the twins sent me some samples of their merchandise which I have been too afraid to open. They told me they're opening up a shop in Diagon Alley in September. I hope we get a chance to see it sometime. I'm sure it'll be a great shop. Your mum sent me fudge and cake, exactly what a growing boy like me needs.

I'm meeting with Remus later today. He told me to meet him in the letter he sent, so at least I won't be completely alone on my birthday. Oh, and I took your advice before I even had a chance to read it and did something quite silly today. I've got people watching me all the time here, so I decided to surprise one of them, Tonks to be exact. I know the surprises are supposed to happen to the birthday boy rather than the birthday boy surprising other people, but my birthdays never were normal.

So I was on my morning jog, and after taking a turn I hid in some hedges and waited for Tonks to come around the corner. She always gets stuck following me when I jog. I snatched the invisibility cloak off of her as she came around the corner. I think I nearly gave her a heart attack, but the expression on her face was definitely worth it. She wasn't too pleased at first, but I told her that it was my birthday and that she should be wishing me a happy day rather than following in my shadows. So we chatted for a bit about things: Sirius, Remus,

life. We were talking about how little we both really knew Sirius. She was related to him but never really saw him because he was in Azkaban half her life. I only knew him for two years, and we only spent a couple months together.

Remus is the one I'm really worried about. He, my dad, Sirius, and Peter Pettigrew were best friends. He lost all of them in basically a day 15 years ago. Then two years ago he gets one of his friends back, and now he's been taken away again, for good this time. That was half the reason I began meeting with him. I wanted to make sure he was ok.

I don't know how I got onto such a serious topic, no pun intended. You're quite easy to write to. I don't know why, but I never have to think about what to say in my letters to you. I wonder if you'll be that easy to talk to in person. We haven't really talked very much in person before. I guess we'll just have to find out. Thanks again for the drawing. It really is wonderful. You have a lot of talent. I best be off to write the rest of my thank you's. Write again soon.

Take care,

Harry

That was one down. Harry wrote letters to Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, , and the twins. They all said similar things, thanking them for the gifts they sent and describing what else he had been given, with personal touches here and there. He told Ron all was forgiven. He told the twins that their offer of 10 of their shop was too generous and that he would accept no more than 5.

He decided not to send a letter to Remus since he would be seeing the man later that day. When all was said and done he found himself with six letters to send. Luckily four of the six would be delivered to the same place. He walked over to his owl and realized that he'd have to find something to hold his letters because he couldn't tie all six to her legs. He conjured a small bag and put all the letters going to the Weasleys in it. He tied the bag to her leg and tied the other two letters to her other leg.

A few minutes later his owl was gone, and he still had a couple hours to go before it would be time to meet Remus. He decided to make himself lunch, so he left his room and walked out into the hallway. His cousin was leaving his room at the time and didn't pay him any attention as he scampered down the stairs. By the time Harry was at the top of the stairs, the front door was slamming shut, his overweight cousin nowhere in sight. "If he moved like that more often he wouldn't be as wide as he is tall," Harry muttered to himself with a small chuckle.

He continued his trek to the kitchen finding his aunt scrubbing at the already miraculously clean countertop. As she looked up at him coming through the doorway, Harry gave her a polite nod and began whistling a tune as he made himself a sandwich. His aunt ignored him at first, but eventually she gave up her efforts and just stared at her nephew, her scrubbing completely forgotten. For his part, Harry paid her no mind. He continued to whistle as he cleaned up after himself and made his way back up to his room to enjoy his sandwich in private. He glanced back at his aunt as he was walking out of the doorway and gave her a grin when he saw her murderous glare.

He was not in the least bit surprised that his relatives weren't acknowledging his birthday. They never celebrated it when he was younger. To be honest, Harry still found himself somewhat surprised and at a loss when his friends sent him gifts. He wasn't used to having people around who cared about him enough to make such a gesture. The habits of youth aren't easily forgotten, but every year he became a little more comfortable and relaxed with the idea. He really was lucky to have such good friends.

When he made it back upstairs to his bedroom, he sat at his desk and began eating his sandwich. When he was halfway through, an owl swooped through the window and into the room. Harry recognized the Hogwarts seal on the envelope as he took the letter from the owl. Harry immediately spotted the headmaster's loopy handwriting on the top piece of paper. He pulled it out and read through.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday. It has just been brought to my attention that you are now eligible to take control of the Potter family vault. The vault had been left in my care for lack of a proper wizarding guardian. Enclosed in this letter are the proper papers signing over the vault to you. All you need to do is sign, and you will come into your full inheritance. If you just send the signed forms back to me, I will take care of everything for you.

I know you would probably like to take a look through your family vault, but I do not know if that will be possible this summer. Your safety is my prime concern, and I'm afraid that Diagon Alley is not safe enough for you to visit. Even with a full guard from the Order, the chances for an attack are just too great to justify the risk.

I will be meeting with the staff of Hogwarts in two weeks time. During that meeting we will discuss the DA and what status you will have as its leader. I will update you on any pertinent information regarding the club that results from the meeting shortly thereafter.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

'That devious old codger,' Harry thought to himself. If Harry hadn't already known otherwise, he would have assumed that he had just come become eligible to inherit the Potter vault today, on his sixteenth birthday, rather than a year ago on his fifteenth birthday. Harry didn't bother trying to kid himself that maybe it was unintentional or a coincidence. This was Dumbledore he was talking about. Everything that man did was well thought out.

He waited to send this letter out until the last day possible, Harry's birthday, so that Harry would not question why he was just now finding out about his family vault. He would naturally assume that it was not brought up before because he could not gain access before today. Harry knew, however, that he should have been given access last year. And he also knew that Dumbledore had been given until the end of the month to hand access over to Harry. It was just convenient

that Harry's birthday was the last day of the month and still within the time frame.

Harry read through the accompanying forms to make sure his headmaster didn't have any other tricks up his sleeve. As far as he could tell, the forms were exactly what he said they would be. They transferred control of the Potter vault and all subsequent deeds and entitlements to Harry James Potter. He took out a quill and signed his name in the few places it asked for his signature.

Harry wrote a short reply back to Dumbledore, thanking him for his birthday wishes and for telling him about the vault. He very much wanted to call the headmaster out on his scheme but knew doing so would only raise questions that he was not willing to answer. The frustrating part was that the headmaster had not lied in his letter; he had merely molded the truth in a form that best fit his purposes. Harry could not accuse him of being untruthful, only manipulative, and the evidence for it was flimsy at best. He could not prove that Dumbledore had purposely misled him even if he tried.

He sent the unfamiliar owl back out with the signed forms and his reply to Dumbledore. By the time the owl was flying out the window, it was only ten minutes until three. Harry rushed out of his room, down the stairs, and out the front door in a flash. He was hurriedly walking through the streets to the park at the end of Magnolia Road. He paid no mind to anyone that he passed along the way. He was eager to reach his destination.

When he finally walked into the park, he began his turn around the path passing closely to each empty bench, knowing one would hold his former professor. Sure enough, as he was passing the third bench, a voice called out to him.

"Happy birthday, Harry." Remus Lupin appeared before him and drew Harry in for a brief hug.

"Thanks," came his reply, muffled by the man's shoulder.

Remus released Harry and took a long look at him. "So I heard you've been having some fun today," he commented.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "Been talking to Tonks, have you?"

"She may have mentioned something about a meeting with you this morning," Remus casually replied.

"Oh?" Harry returned. "And what did she have to say?"

"Only that you scared her half to death," his friend replied, cracking a grin.

"She did seem rather jumpy this morning," Harry replied, completely composed.

"The way she tells it, she had plenty reason to be startled," Remus retorted.

"Hmm," Harry shrugged noncommittally.

"Says you jumped her from a shrub and snatched the invisibility cloak right off of her before she even knew what was happening," Remus was smiling widely now.

"I might remember something like that," Harry said, his composure cracking as he snorted a laugh. "The look on her face was priceless," he finally choked out.

Remus joined in his mirth. "I would imagine so. I don't think she ever expected to be attacked by the person she was protecting. I don't think any of them thought you knew you were even being followed."

"After last summer how could I not know?" Harry asked, repeating Remus's words almost verbatim. "If they were guarding me last summer when Voldemort was lying low, I imagine that if anything they would double their efforts this summer now that he's finally out in the open."

“And you aren’t too far off base,” Remus replied. “You won’t find Mundungus on guard duty any more, or any of the less experienced members either. They’ve got only combat ready members watching over you at all times. The only auror who has completely escaped guard duty is Mad-Eye because he’s got experience on everyone else and is too often needed elsewhere.”

‘And thank Merlin for that,’ Harry thought to myself. ‘If he were guarding me, he’d notice that I’m not always in the neighborhood, so to speak. I’m lucky he hasn’t been guarding or my cover would have been blown a long time ago.’ “I see,” was all he returned out loud.

“So do you see Tonks often then?” Harry asked, changing the subject.

“Every so often,” Remus said timorously. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason at all,” Harry replied coolly.

“I know that look, Harry James Potter,” the werewolf shot back. “Just what do you think you’re getting at?”

Harry’s grin only grew at his former professor’s discomfort. “Whatever do you mean, Remus?” he asked innocently.

“I’ve seen that look enough on your father to know that it means you’re up to something.”

“Remus, I’m hurt,” Harry grinned. “How could you accuse me of such a thing?”

“Well how about you, Harry?” Remus said attempting to shift the focus off of himself. “I hear you’ve been getting a fair share of owls coming in. You haven’t been getting anything from the young Miss Chang now, have you?”

Harry smiled widely at the man’s attempt to turn the tables. “Nah, we broke up months ago. I haven’t thought about her at all this summer,

but your defensive behavior is only confirming my suspicions, Remus."

"And what are you suspicious of?" Remus asked in return.

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to embarrass you" Harry said with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

"Oh bollocks," Remus exclaimed. "Come on, out with it already."

His friend's behavior was only encouraging Harry. "Oh if you insist," Harry paused dramatically. "I don't know if you've noticed, but Tonks is a girl."

"Of course she's a girl..."

"Oh so you have noticed, then," Harry interrupted. "And you see, sometimes when a boy and a girl are grown up, they may find themselves becoming attracted to members of the opposite sex, or in some cases of the same sex."

"Honestly, Harry, I'm as old as your parents. I don't need a speech about the birds and the bees," Remus groaned.

"So you know all about your attraction to Tonks and what you should be doing about it then?" Harry inquired.

"Of course I know what to do about it," Remus shouted.

Harry abruptly burst out laughing. As Remus thought about what he'd just said he turned brick red, encouraging Harry to laugh even harder. He was soon rolling on the ground clutching his sides trying desperately to get in a breath around his laughter.

"Oh, you're not that funny," Remus half-heartedly rebuked. In truth he was rather glad to see the young man in such good spirits. The fact that it was at his own expense was just a minor drawback.

When Harry finally recovered from his mirth he adopted the sternest expression he could manage and asked, "So what are your intentions with Tonks?"

At the stern look he got in reply, Harry scampered out of reach of the werewolf, who took a swat at Harry's head, and doubled over in laughter yet again. "I'm sorry," he choked out trying to regain control. "I just couldn't resist."

"You're rather full of yourself today, aren't you?" Remus asked. "You're just lucky it's your birthday, or we, the victims of your fun, might not be so inclined to let you get away with it."

"Oh, lighten up, Moony," Harry said exasperatedly. "Weren't you one of the marauders? I'm sure you put up with far worse than that in the past."

"Well I won't deny that," Remus replied grinning in remembrance of his youth. "And believe it or not, I was known to give out as well as I got."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," said Harry behind a grin. "So you never answered my question," Harry commented. When Remus didn't respond he continued "What are your intentions with the young, Miss Tonks?"

"I believe that that is none of your business," was the reply.

"Fine, if you won't tell me about your girlfriend, you won't get to hear about mine," Harry bluffed.

"Tonks is not my girlfriend," Remus responded.

"Well what are you waiting for?" Harry questioned.

"She's much too young for me. Besides, what would she ever see in an old, poor, tired, worn werewolf like me?" Remus asked.

“So you are interested, then?” Harry asked seriously. Harry glanced at Remus and continued when he saw that the man was about to start raving at him. “Don’t sell yourself short. Tonks isn’t the type to care about your furry little problem. As for what she sees in you, I’m not sure I’m the right person to ask because whatever it is, it sure as hell isn’t doing anything for me.”

Remus half-heartedly glared at him. “You’re entirely too full of yourself today.”

“Well, better than being full of someone else, at least,” Harry returned.

“I think if aimed at someone besides me, I could rather like this side of you.”

Harry adopted the most innocent, childlike look he could muster, “Thanks Uncle Moony.”

Chapter 4: OWLs and Alley Cats

A few days later, right after his morning workout, Harry got a visit from the same owl that had borne the headmaster's letter on his birthday. It was carrying another letter with the Hogwarts seal on it. As Harry ripped it open and dumped it out, his eyes were immediately drawn to the red and gold badge with the letter 'C' on it. A letter was attached.

Dear Mr. Potter,

It is with great pleasure that I am able to inform you that the ridiculous educational decrees passed by Delores Umbridge have all been repealed, including your lifelong ban on Quidditch. Katie Bell spoke with me before the year was through and expressed her wish for the captaincy to be offered to you. She felt that since she would have enough going on with her NEWTs this year that you would be able to handle the spot better than she. I have to say that I am inclined to agree that you would make a magnificent captain.

I have become accustomed to having the Quidditch and House cup in my office, and I hope to keep both there for years to come. I trust you will not let me down.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry picked up the next piece of parchment and momentarily froze at the words on the top of the page before continuing down.

Ordinary Wizarding Level Results

Pass Grades Fail Grades

Outstanding (O) Poor (P)

Exceeds Expectations (E) Dreadful (D)

Acceptable (A) Troll (T)

The results for Harry James Potter are as follows:

Astronomy:A

Care of Magical Creatures:E

Charms:O

Defense Against the Dark Arts:O

Divination:A

Herbology:E

History of Magic:D

Potions:O

Transfiguration:E

Special distinction goes to the student for this exam for scoring over 100 percent.

Harry smiled a genuine smile after reading his results. He had actually done it. He had all the scores he needed, and he had done it all on his own. He didn't need any favors to get into the classes he'd need to be an auror. He had received a total of 8 OWLs, three of them Outstandings. And he had scored over 100 on his Defense exam. The examiner had offered him extra points for conjuring his corporeal Patronus. Apparently that had been enough to put him over the top.

The next letter was the standard notice that the Hogwarts Express would be leaving from King's Cross Platform 9 3/4 on the first of September. There was another sheet listing the courses he was

eligible to take next term asking him to mark the ones he would be taking and to return the completed form to Professor McGonagall right away. She recommended that students not sign up for more than 7 courses without first consulting her. The last sheet of paper was the booklist.

Harry filled out the class form, marking down DADA, Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, and Care of Magical Creatures. He sat down at his desk and began writing his Head of House a note.

Dear Professor McGonagall,

I regret to inform you that I am turning down the Gryffindor Quidditch captaincy. I'm ecstatic to be back on the team, but I don't think I am well suited to be captain despite my seniority on the team. I don't know if you know this yet, but I will be hosting the DA again this year. I plan to invest a lot of time in my lessons with the other students, and I aim to do well in my classes as well.

Adding the captaincy onto my workload would put me in a bind. Not only that, but I don't know that much about Quidditch. I have only ever played seeker, and I know nothing about strategy. You would be better off with someone who has followed the sport his whole life and is intimately familiar with all the positions and everything involved in the sport. My recommendation for the spot would be Ron Weasley. I've never met anyone who knows more about the sport.

I hope you understand my decision. I think you'll find that Ron would make a much better captain than me anyway.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

He stuck his letter, the captain's badge, and the class form into an envelope and wrote Professor McGonagall on the front of the letter. He gave it to the brown owl that had waited around expecting a response, and the owl took off out his window without preamble.

Harry decided that now that he had his booklist and control of the Potter vault, it was time to make another trip to Diagon Alley. It was still early in the morning, around 9:00. He quickly got ready and was apparating out of his house 15 minutes later, a dark blonde haired, brown eyed, scarless boy. He had found a nice glamour charm used to conceal blemishes or unsightly scars which took care of his telltale lightning bolt scar. His trunk was in his pocket to hold his purchases for the day.

He strode through the sporadically populated streets purposefully toward the tall white columns of Gringotts bank. He ascended the stairs and passed the security into the main lobby. Harry approached the first available goblin teller and asked "I'd like to be taken to the Potter family vault please, by Griphook, if he's available," Harry added.

"May I ask why you have requested Griphook?" the teller asked curiously, seeming to forget to be discourteous.

"Griphook has taken me to my personal vault the two times I have been here before. The last time I was here, he was very helpful. Plus, he is the only goblin I know," Harry explained.

The goblin must have been pleased enough with his response because he called "Griphook," without further questioning. When the familiar goblin appeared, the teller continued "Please take Mr. Potter here to the Potter family vault."

Griphook looked at the teller in shock and asked "Why..." before he was interrupted by the teller.

"Mr. Potter has specifically requested that you take him to his family vault," the goblin said in a stern tone.

Griphook seemed startled by this proclamation but quickly recovered and turned toward Harry. "You do me great honor," he said with a nod of his head that might be taken as a bow. "Please follow me." He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

Harry followed the goblin into back into the caverns and into a cart before finally asking "What was all that about?"

Griphook answered the question with a question "What do you mean?"

"Why did you seem so surprised that they'd ask you to take me to my vault? And why did you tell me I honored you?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"Your family vault is not like your personal vault. It is one of the older vaults and is very heavily protected. It is deep within the mines underneath the bank and is normally only accessed by senior goblins. It would be another 20 years before I become eligible to be promoted to a level that I might handle such vaults. A goblin in my position being asked to take anyone to such a vault is unheard of," Griphook explained.

"Oh," was all Harry could think to say in reply. The ride was especially long, at least twice as long as the trip to his personal vault, Harry decided. When they finally arrived Harry realized something "Umm, Griphook?"

"Yes, Mr. Pot – I mean Harry?" the goblin replied.

"I just realized I don't have a key for the vault," Harry explained. He was about to say more about the circumstances when he was interrupted.

"These vaults do not require a key, Mr. Potter. Not for blood members of the family, anyway. Follow me." Griphook exited the cart and led Harry, who had dutifully grabbed the lantern from its stand, up to a door with just a relatively small round impression in it. "Place your hand in the circle."

Harry did as he was instructed by placing his palm within the circle. Nothing happened for a brief moment, then Harry heard a rumble and a number of clicks and the sound of stone grinding against stone.

Moments later the entryway was open and he was staring into a treasure room.

There was gold everywhere. Some was contained within trunks half of which were open, but there were mountains of gold scattered around. The room was enormous. Harry noticed there was some old fashioned furniture on his left. He walked over to a shelf that was holding various objects in it, many of which were forms of jewelry or precious stones. There was a sofa nearby with a table in front of it. On top of the table an envelope caught Harry's eye. As he walked closer, Harry realized that there was writing on the envelope, his name.

Harry snatched up the envelope and sank into the sofa behind him. He stared at his name on the envelope for what could have been an hour but was probably closer to a minute. He eventually shook himself out of his stupor and gently opened up the envelope. There were two pieces of parchment inside, different handwriting, but both beginning with the words Dear Son. Harry hungrily lifted the letter in feminine script and devoured its contents.

Dear Son,

Writing this letter to you is probably the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life. Your father and I are taking you and going into hiding tomorrow. Voldemort found out about some prophecy that might name you as his future killer, so you have become one of his prime targets. What could possess a man to attack an infant is beyond me, especially one as precious as you, but Voldemort seemingly lost his humanity long ago.

I am writing this letter because I fear for what might happen. If you are reading this, then my fears were well founded. I am sorry that I was unable to be there for you as you grew up. Since the day I learned I was pregnant, you have been the center of my life. I want you to know that I love you with all of my heart. I take comfort in the fact that I know that your father and Sirius love you as much as I do, so I know you will always be in good hands.

This past year with you has been the best year of my life in spite of the war. You are a light in my life that could guide me through the darkest of times. You are the most precious baby in the world. And I think you might be the only person that is capable of taming Sirius. The only time he shows the smallest amount of responsibility is when he's holding you. And we know you're going to be one powerful wizard someday because we've already seen you doing magic. When you see something you want, you'll do everything in your power to get it, even if it means summoning it from across the room.

When you're reading this I imagine you'll be all grown up already. I want you to know that I will always watch over you through the good times and the bad. If you ever feel alone, know that I am always with you in your heart. What I hope for most is that you live a long and happy life. Always stick up for what you believe in and follow your dreams through to the end. Don't let others dictate how to live your life. Your life is your own to live as you see fit. And if you find love, hold onto it with everything you have. Believe me when I say that it is worth it.

I love you, Harry.

Lily Potter

Tears dropped onto the parchment that he hadn't even realized he'd been crying. His whole life Harry had wanted something from his parents, anything at all. He craved something that would tell him even a little bit about his mom and dad. At the end of his first year at Hogwarts he was given a picture album of his parents. That was the only thing he owned, besides his father's invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map, that linked him to either of his parents. Now he had a letter from his mom sitting in his hands, written to him. It was quite literally a dream come true.

And it wasn't just any old letter that she had written. It was meant for Harry, written to Harry. It said all the things that he had been longing to hear for all his life, though he had long given up hope. He reverently replaced his mom's note in the envelope and opened up the second letter.

Dear Son,

I don't know where to start. I am writing this letter because there is a very good possibility that I may not make it out of this war alive. Unless you are taken here beforehand, you will not receive this until you're fifteen, practically a man. I'm sorry I was not there for you while you were growing up. I would have loved to be the one to teach you to fly. You're going to be a great Quidditch player someday, just like your old man; I can feel it. You already love flying, but don't tell your mother that I've taken you on a broom. I'd never hear the end of it.

Sirius thinks you'll be a seeker, but I think you'll follow in my footsteps and be the best chaser Gryffindor has seen since your old man. You're already doing magic, which entertains us to no end. You even once levitated Padfoot into your crib to cuddle with as you went to sleep. Sirius would never say so, but I don't think he'd ever been so happy in his life. He loves you like you were his own son, and I know he will have taken good care of you.

Now for the fatherly advise that you've been missing out on your whole life. I don't imagine Sirius ever had too many words of wisdom to give you. One day you're going to find a woman who is everything that you could ever hope for in a partner. And I'll bet you she's got red hair. Some call it a curse, I call it a blessing, but you're a Potter, and Potters always end up with redheads. Though if you find yourself a winner without the hair, don't listen to me about this stupid curse. When you find the one, never let go. Fight to the end of the Earth for her if you have to. There will never be a more important battle than the one you wage for the love of your life.

I knew your mother was the one for me right away. She was a little harder to convince, but I never gave up. She fought me good and hard for awhile, but she eventually caved in and gave me a shot, and we never turned back after that. I love your mother very much, but we both love you more than life itself. We will always be watching out for you. Any time you stumble in life or need someone to turn to, know that we will always be there in spirit. Live your life whatever way makes you happy, and know that your mother and I will always support you.

I love you, Harry.

James Potter

Tears were again streaming down Harry's face, but he was aware enough to wipe them off before they managed to drip down onto the letter. It wasn't so much anything specific that was said in the letters but just the overall sentiment behind them that touched Harry so. His parents loved him. To actually have tangible evidence of it was overwhelming. He had always hoped and thought that his parents loved him, but it was just blind hope. His relatives hated him and had never shown him the slightest bit of sentimentality. So he imagined what his real family was like and how great it would have been if his parents were still alive. But it was never real before now. Now he knew that he was loved like a child should be loved by a parent.

He could remember times before Hogwarts when he was locked up in the cupboard under the stairs with nothing to pass the time but his imagination. He would imagine his parents and what his life would have been like had they still been around. He had never seen pictures of them before, not even of his mum who had been his Aunt Petunia's sister, so the figures didn't even look exactly like his parents. But at the time it didn't matter because he didn't know any better. His imaginary parents had loved him very much and doted over him the way any real parent would.

The more he learned of his real parents, the more his imaginary world was destroyed. Harry didn't mind, though, because reality was so much better than the illusion. He could only guess what his parents were like in his mind, and he always held on to his doubts. But he didn't have to doubt this because the letters had come from his parents. There was no guessing or imagining here. His parents loved him.

He slipped his father's letter back into the envelope with his mother's and extracted his trunk from his pocket. He put the envelope in the trunk before shrinking it up again and placing it back in his pocket. He wasn't going to let anything happen to those letters.

Wiping his eyes Harry resumed his tour of the vault. There were a couple bookcases filled with volumes upon volumes of old tomes. Harry glanced through the titles on the spines of the books and selected a few that caught his interest. Basic Healing Spells Every Parent Should Know, The Fidelius Charm: Guard Your Secrets Well, and Portkey Creation were among the few to be transferred into the collection in his trunk.

On a desk he found a pile of papers containing a couple deeds to properties he now owned. The only name he recognized from the pile was Godric's Hollow, but he apparently also owned a few other houses scattered throughout Great Britain. He found a collection of portraits and paintings in a corner of the vault. He selected a couple paintings of landscapes to hang in the rooms of his trunk. The walls had come bare and could use some spicing up.

Harry wandered around the vault for a couple of hours total, looking through things at random. He hadn't really come with a purpose. He just wanted something to link him to his family, his past. He had found it in spades in his parents' letters. There was still plenty more to look through, but he decided that he had had enough for the day. He still had other business to attend to.

He walked back to Griphook, and the pair rode the cart back up to the surface. Harry mentioned that he would like to exchange some galleons for muggle pounds, so Griphook led Harry to the appropriate line. Harry had been in possession of wizarding money for several years, but he had never thought to change some of it into muggle money. He had never had anything in the muggle world. He still wore his cousin's enormous cast-offs, practically swimming in them. With a bit of muggle money he could become a little more presentable. He exchanged 100 galleons for a little over 500 pounds given the exchange rate.

Harry continued on with his shopping excursion. He went to Flourish and Blott's and purchased the text books he would need for his classes next term. He picked up a couple other books as well that had caught his fancy, a more in depth look at various wards, advanced techniques of Occlumency, and dueling were the major subjects of the extra volumes.

Harry next made his way to Madam Malkin's robe shop. The matron was busy attending to another customer at the time, so Harry absentmindedly browsed through the racks of robes while waiting. He needed new school robes for sure, but thought he might benefit from some other robes as well. He didn't know if and when he would ever be going to another ball, but it couldn't hurt to have dress robes that fit him. But what about wearing robes outside of school? It might be nice to have some robes that he could wear around wizarding places such as Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade that were not his school robes.

By the time Madam Malkin walked over to Harry, he was already tallying up all that he wanted to buy. "How can I help you, young man?" the shopkeeper asked kindly.

Harry gave a little start as he had not noticed her approach. "Oh, I need some school robes for Hogwarts. And I would also like dress robes and some casual robes as well," he replied.

Her eyes lit up, whether from the prospect of selling so much merchandise or just being given the chance to fit him in so many different robes Harry was not sure. She immediately set her measuring tape on him. It roved around his body on her command measuring everything from his inseam to the length of his left shoulder to his right knee and the length of his right index finger. He wasn't sure why most of the measurements were made or how many actually served a purpose, but soon enough he was being ushered into a changing room with the standard black Hogwarts robes to try on.

"Try these school robes on first, dear. Did you have anything in mind for your other robes? Or would you like me to pick some things out for you to try?" she asked as she guided him to the curtained off stall.

"I'd appreciate your help picking the robes out, thank you," he politely replied.

Harry tried on the school robes, and, as expected, they fit perfectly fine. He told Madam Malkin as much, so she set the robes aside behind the counter before bustling back to the racks of robes searching for the rest of Harry's robes. She handed him a few dress robes to try first. One was green, similar to the robe he had worn to the Yule Ball that Mrs. Weasley had claimed would bring out his eyes. Another was black with a silver trim and a silver dragon displayed on the back. The next robe was crimson with gold etchings, 'Gryffindor through and through,' Harry thought as he glanced over it. A golden phoenix was embroidered on the back.

Harry tried all three on and found that he rather liked the black and the crimson robes. He realized as he was looking at himself in the mirror that he would look much different with his normal appearance while wearing the robes, which made it rather difficult to decide which he liked best. In the end, he decided in favor of the crimson robes. If nothing else, he would be showing his support of Gryffindor by wearing them.

Harry was then given a few simple robes that were similar to his Hogwarts robes only not black. There were several different colored robes: green, red, blue, yellow, gray, and silver to name a few. He chose the green, blue, and gray ones, and they were added to his increasing pile behind the counter.

The storeowner asked Harry if there was anything else he would like. Harry told her that that would be all he needed, so she proceeded to ring him out. "70 galleons, 4 sickles please," she informed Harry.

Harry repeated the cost and pulled the exact amount out of his money bag. He threw all of his robes into his trunk and with a quick "Thank you," he was walking out the door. Harry's next stop was the stationery shop to stock up on ink, parchment, and quills followed by the apothecary to replenish his potions supplies. It was a quick stop, only getting precisely what was needed and not wasting any time browsing around.

He made his way to Eeylops Owl Emporium next. He was running low on owl treats and knew that Hedwig would not be happy if he had nothing left to give to her. Their relationship was building now that he

was able to turn into an owl and hold a conversation with her, but Hedwig was a proud owl and would expect to be rewarded properly for her service, and Harry was inclined to agree with her..

After stockpiling on owl treats, Harry wandered through the Alley until he came up a store that had dragon hide clothing prominently displayed in the window. He looked up at the sign to find the store was called Toller's Personal Defense. Harry shrugged his shoulders and opened the door. The shop was average sized, lined with shelves displaying various products. One section was devoted to sneakoscopes. There were several mirrors on the wall that Harry presumed were foe glasses based on the images that were appearing in the glass.

Harry came to a section full of wand holsters. There were a few different varieties. Some would attach to your wrist and with a little flick would pop out into your awaiting hand. There were some that attached to your leg. There was also a variety embedded within some dragon hide boots. There were different accessories within each kind as well. Some were just basic with no extra enchantments. Some prevented your wand from being summoned while it was in the holster. Others appeared to be invisible while attached to your arm.

He grabbed six of the wrist holsters that would prevent your wand from being summoned while housed in it and that turned invisible while attached to your arm. He figured it was the least he could do for his five friends who had followed him into the Department of Mysteries. They were all linked to him now and would most likely become targets for Death Eaters. Any small advantage that he could give them, he would.

Harry grabbed a small foe glass for himself as well. It couldn't hurt to have it around as a precaution. He paid for the six wand holsters and mirror before exiting the shop. He then traversed the busy streets to the Leaky Cauldron to have some lunch. He entered the pub to find it slightly crowded. Harry scanned the crowd for any familiar faces but thankfully came up empty, so he made his way straight over to the bar. He asked Tom for some fish and chips, which was served to him a minute later with a bottle of butterbeer.

Harry polished off his meal quickly and thanked Tom for the meal. He paid the bartender, then exited the pub into the muggle world. As long as he was out and now had a pocketful of muggle money, he might as well do a little muggle shopping as well.

Harry entered the streets to find the sidewalks filled with pedestrians hurrying about their business. The streets were filled with cars speeding by and others stopped at the red traffic lights. Unfamiliar with the area, Harry asked a woman nearby for directions to the nearest department store. She looked to be in her 40's and was wearing a green business suit. "Excuse me, ma'am. I don't mean to bother you, but could you possibly tell me where the nearest department store is? I'm not from around here, and I need to pick up a few things."

The woman gave him a warm smile and replied "Certainly dear. It's not every day one meets a young man like you with such manners. If you just walk down this street two blocks and make a left, then there will be a store about a block down."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry responded politely. He was on his way in the direction he had been pointed and followed the movements of the crowd around him. He wasn't familiar with the traffic signals and when it was proper to cross an intersection, but he knew well enough not to just walk into traffic. He just followed the lead of the crowd and picked up on the flow quickly. After two blocks he turned to his left and headed down that street. About a block down, he saw the large department store the woman had directed him to. He counted himself lucky that the store was so close and that he had met the nice woman who gave him directions. On his own he might have wandered for hours without ever finding a suitable store.

Before he went into the store, Harry ducked into an alleyway. He changed his hair back to its customary black, but left it at its shoulder length. It was, after all, how he wanted it to eventually look. He also took out his brown contacts and put in his clear ones instead. In the muggle world he had no fear of being recognized, and he wanted to have a better idea of how he looked in his clothes than he had gotten in Madam Malkin's with his features altered.

Harry entered the store and had no idea where to go. The store was massive. He walked into the store a little and thankfully came upon a store map. He located a section titled Young Men's and decided that was the best place to start. This required him to go to the second floor, so Harry headed to the nearest escalator. As he rode the machine up he imagined that Mr. Weasley would probably have a heart attack from his excitement riding the machine had he been there with Harry.

As Harry stepped off the escalator he glanced around for a moment before he located the sign marking the Young Men's department. He walked over and began looking through the various clothes on display and found himself very quickly overwhelmed. There were a hundred different kinds of jeans in various sizes, and he had no idea what the difference was. There seemed to be thousand of different shirts. Some were collared, some not. Some were short sleeved, some long. Some had designs or patterns on them, others were plain, while others had words and phrases printed across them. There were dress pants in various styles and colors. Harry thought that there were at least a hundred different shades of khaki pants on display.

It must have shown on Harry's face that he had no idea where to start because he was only looking for a couple minutes before a young woman, probably no more than a year or two older than him, approached. "Did you need any help today? You look a bit lost."

Harry gave her a shy smile as his cheeks tinged slightly pink. The girl was attractive. She had brown hair, slightly curly, with blonde highlights streaked through it. She was a couple inches shorter than Harry with a collared shirt on with the top few buttons undone, displaying just a hint of cleavage, but not enough to be unseemly. The blouse was tucked into the skirt she was wearing which came to about mid thigh. She wasn't extremely skinny, but she definitely wasn't overweight. She was healthy.

"Err – " Harry stammered. He took a second to compose himself before he tried again. "That would be great. I've never really gone shopping for myself before. I've always just been given my cousin's hand-me-downs." Harry pulled at the extremely loose fitting clothing adorning his body to emphasize his point. "As you can see we're not

exactly the same size. I came into some money recently and decided it was time to get some clothes of my own, but I don't even know where to start."

She gave Harry a warm smile. "Say no more. My name is Jessica, and by the time I'm done with you, you'll look like a new man. I promise."

"Thanks," Harry replied, then added as an afterthought "I'm Harry."

"Don't mention it, Harry," she returned. "I get paid on commission."

Harry gave a little snort before commenting, "Well then I guess this is your lucky day."

"You might say that," she said as she shot him a dazzling smile and gave him a wink.

Harry felt his face heat up. Was this girl flirting with him? And she wasn't flirting with the Boy-Who-Lived like some girl in the Wizarding World might do. She had no idea who that even was. She was flirting with just plain old Harry. He found that he rather enjoyed the attention when it wasn't directed at him because of something he didn't even actually do.

Jessica interrupted his thoughts as she took his hand and said, "Follow me."

She led him over to a counter and left him standing on the outside of it as she entered in a small gate that took her behind it. She ducked down for a moment before reemerging holding a tape measurer. "I'll just have to take a couple measurements to get an idea of what size you are," she informed him.

Harry nodded and said, "Alright."

She came back around to the front of the counter and said, "Stand up straight, arms at your sides." She proceeded to measure from shoulder to shoulder and the length of his arms. "Arms up," she

instructed. She wrapped the tape measure around his waist and noted that measurement as well. The inseam measurement came next, and Harry found that being measured in the muggle world was a lot more intimate than being measured in the Wizarding World. When she stood up after taking the final measurement, both teens were blushing. Harry's cheeks resembled a tomato while Jessica's were only pink. For once Harry was grateful that he was wearing his cousin's enormous clothing.

"So what kind of clothes are you looking for exactly? And what's your budget?" Jessica asked as she put the measuring tape away.

"Well, I guess I'm looking for a little bit of everything. And I've got a little over 500 pounds to spend."

Jessica's eyes bulged slightly at the amount of money mentioned, but she quickly recovered herself. "Okay, so jeans, dress pants, shirts: both casual and dressy, shorts...Do you need shoes as well?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Trainers and nicer ones?" she questioned.

"Uh huh."

"Underwear?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" he retorted.

"Do you need to buy underwear as well?" she inquired with an apologetic smile.

"Oh, err," Harry began to stammer again. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"Boxers or briefs?"

Harry's face was heating up yet again. "Umm...boxers."

“Okay. Do you play any sports or anything?”

Not sure where she was going with this Harry just supplied “I jog and workout every morning. And I sometimes play sports when I’m away at school.”

She smirked a little at his response and continued. “Alright, so you’ll need some clothes to run and workout in as well.” She paused as if mentally tallying everything she had just mentioned. “Let’s get started then, shall we?”

Harry nodded absently and said, “Okay.”

She led him through the various shelves and racks of clothing. Occasionally she would pick something out and either add it right to the pile or hold it up to Harry to get a better idea of how it would look on him before either adding it to the pile or putting it back. Before long Harry was holding several pairs of pants, jeans and nicer ones, a few t-shirts and some collared ones as well, a couple pairs of shorts, and a few packages with boxers inside.

“I think that’s enough to get started with,” she said looking at the pile of clothes in his arms. “Why don’t you try those on, and I’ll keep looking. Tell me what you like and don’t like out of those, and I’ll try to find more that suit your tastes.”

“Alright,” he replied. “Where do I change?”

“Right this way,” she instructed and led him through a little doorway into a room with several stalls lining the wall. She opened up one of the doors and waved him into it. “You can change right in here. I’ll be in and out bringing you new clothes and taking ones you don’t like back. Just let me know which ones you do and don’t like as you try them on. If you want a second opinion just come out wearing whatever it is, and I’ll tell you what I think.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied with a grin as he stepped into the stall and dumped two armfuls of clothes onto a bench. He turned back toward

the door and gave Jessica a small smile as he closed the door and set to work on trying on the dozens of articles of clothing before him.

It was a slow process, but they were making progress. Knowing absolutely nothing about fashion or what looked good, Harry more often than not found himself stepping out of the dressing room and asking for Jessica's opinion. She gave her honest opinion on each piece, but always had some insightful comment to make. She liked one shirt because the green in it really brought out the color of his eyes. There was a pair of jeans that she said really didn't fit his style because it was generally worn by the more rebellious type. She nixed some things claiming they were too loose. The only things she ever vetoed for being too tight were pants. There were some shirts where Harry felt a little constricted, but when he brought it up she would only smile and reassure him that he looked great in it, always with a bright smile on her face.

She was getting a fair amount of exercise going back and forth from the changing room to the racks of clothing outside, returning clothes they didn't like and bringing back new ones for him to try. She didn't seem to mind a bit though. She'd probably be making more on the commission of his purchase than she would normally make in a full day's work. Not only that, but she found Harry to be kind of cute and modest and sweet.

The two kept up a fragmented conversation as Jessica came in and out of the changing room. She told him that she was going to start attending a nearby university in the fall and was working here to help pay the tuition. He told her that he went to a boarding school in Scotland that his parents had gone to. He briefly mentioned that his parents had died when he was one and that he lived with his aunt, uncle, and cousin now but that he didn't get along well with them. Sensing that it was a sensitive subject, Jessica began talking about her own family life and didn't ask him any probing questions about his.

Eventually Harry ended up with a few pairs of jeans, a couple casual pairs of khakis, a couple pairs of dress pants in khaki and black, a good dozen casual t-shirts, several collared shirts, a few long sleeve shirts and sweatshirts for when it got cooler, a couple pairs of casual shorts, some workout shorts and shirts, and over a dozen pairs of

boxers. All they needed now was to pick out a couple pairs of shoes, and they would be done.

Jessica led him out of the Young Men's department and across the store, down an escalator into the shoe department. They were each carrying a few bags filled with the clothes they had already picked out. When they walked into the shoe department they were immediately intercepted by a man who looked to be in his forties. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Actually I'm already being helped, thanks," Harry replied gesturing toward Jessica.

"Ah, hello Jessica," he greeted condescendingly. "I'm sure she was rather helpful selecting clothes, but I can assure you that there is not an employee in the store who knows this section better than I. I would be more than happy to take over from here. Jessica you can leave the bags here, and I'll make sure the young man gets taken care of."

Before Jessica could answer, Harry interrupted. "Actually, sir," Harry intoned, "I'd much rather have Jessica continue to help me. She's been extremely helpful so far, and I think she has a great idea of what I'm looking for. So if you'll just excuse us, we'll get on with our shopping."

The man shot the two teens a scathing glare before stalking off to help some other customers. Jessica flashed Harry a wide smile and said, "Thanks Harry. You don't know how many times he's done something like that and just takes over the sale at the last second claiming all the commission for himself. He only gets away with it because he knows the owner."

"Hey, I meant what I said," Harry returned with a small smile. "You've been great. I'd still be wandering around clueless if not for you. The least I can do is make sure you get the credit for all you've done for me."

"Thanks, Harry," she said. "Now come on, we still have to find you some shoes." She grabbed his hand and proceeded to lead him over

to a shelf displaying a collection of trainers. "Now let's see, first things first: we need to measure your feet. Take off your shoes, please."

Harry did as he was told and soon enough she was bringing him trainers and asking what he thought of them. He liked a few of the ones she had picked out, so she brought him the right size and had him try each one on. He walked around a little bit in each to get a feel for how comfortable each one was. He eventually selected the pair he liked best, and they moved on to brown shoes. The process repeated once again, which led them to the final pair of black shoes. When they finally had all the shoes selected, they picked up all the bags again and Jessica led him to the front of the store.

She rung him up behind the counter, which took a considerably long time given how much stuff he was buying. The total came up to be about 475 pounds. He pulled out the five hundred pound notes he had been given by the goblins and gave them to Jessica. She counted out the change and went to hand it to Harry, but he just shook his head.

"Keep it," he told her. "Consider it a thank you for all your help."

She blushed beautifully at his gesture but persisted. "I really couldn't do that. It's too much. Here," she again tried to hand the money to Harry.

"Please. Like I told you, I recently came into a lot of money that I really have no use for. And you have been a huge help to me today, and I actually had a lot of fun shopping with you," he told her feeling his own face heat up again. "I don't really have any other way to say thank you, so please just keep it?"

She looked as if she was about to argue more but she paused and looked deep into his eyes as if searching for something. Her resolve softened and a small smile graced her lips, creating a small dimple in her left cheek. Seeing her expression change from one of resolve to acceptance, Harry smiled widely.

Jessica pulled a small card out of her pocket and grabbed a pen off the counter and wrote something on it. After she was finished she tilted her head back up and looked him in the eye again. She bit her lip softly as she lifted the card up and held it out to him. "If you ever need a personal shopper again, just give me a call," she explained behind a smile. "You're a really sweet guy, Harry. Don't be afraid to call, even if it has nothing to do with shopping."

Harry cursed himself as he felt his face heating up for what seemed like the hundredth time since coming into the store. He knew that he was probably grinning like an idiot, but he couldn't do anything to help it. He took the card from Jessica and gave her another one of his shy smiles. "Thanks," he replied softly. "I'll have to keep that in mind."

"Be sure that you do," she replied with a winning smile. "Do you need some help taking these things out to your car?"

"Oh...no. No, I think I can get everything out there okay," Harry answered. "Thanks again for all your help Jessica."

"It was my pleasure, Harry," she responded.

Harry's cheeks tinged with pink yet again as he collected all of his purchases together and set off for the store's exit. He glanced back over his shoulder to find that Jessica was following his exit with her eyes, still standing at the counter. She gave a little wave goodbye to which Harry could only respond with a grin because both his hands were tied up with the bags of clothes.

As he came out of the store, Harry returned to the alleyway he had visited before entering the store to change his appearance back to normal. Here he stored his new purchases in his trunk. Once everything was safely inside and his trunk was tucked back into his pocket, Harry apparated back to Privet Drive.

Harry noticed as he appeared in his bedroom that his owl's cage was empty. Finding that somewhat curious since she didn't normally leave to hunt until after dark, Harry wondered where Hedwig had gone off to. Shrugging off his curiosity, he sorted through all of his new

purchases and put everything away properly. He changed out of his cousin's old clothes and put on one of his new pairs of jeans and a white t-shirt. Harry looked in the mirror and shortened his hair a bit to the last length he had it at. He was about halfway through his gradual lengthening of his hair. It was at a somewhat awkward length right now, but he knew that in a little bit of time it would be just how he liked it.

Harry read for a couple hours before his hunger got the better of him. He ate his dinner quickly, eager to get out of the Dursley's company and back into the solitude of his bedroom. He resumed his reading when he returned to his room. He didn't see a sign of his owl until the next afternoon when a white blur in his window drew his attention away from his books. He looked over to see Hedwig gliding towards him with a letter attached to her leg.

"So that's where you were off to," Harry said. "You were out fetching mail for me." He gave her some owl treats as a thank you, then looked to the letter in his hands. He could tell it was from Ginny right away just from the way she had written his name on the outside. They were owling enough over the summer for him to become very familiar with her handwriting. He had just gotten a letter from her a few days back in reply to the thank you he'd sent for his birthday gift, but he hadn't sent a letter back since then. He wondered why she was writing him again so soon. Harry tore the letter open to find out.

Dear Harry,

I think your owl likes me. She just showed up last night without any mail to deliver. She spent the night in my room, although I left the window open for her, so she may have been in and out during the night. After breakfast this morning I figured maybe I should write a letter for her to take back to you before you started to worry where she was.

We got our Hogwarts letters yesterday morning. I didn't make prefect, not that I really mind all that much. I have no desire to have the extra responsibility thrust upon me, but it would have been nice to have gotten the rewards for it. I figured I might get a cat or maybe an owl. I've never had a pet of my own before. Oh well.

Ron got his OWL results which I gather were decent but not outstanding based on both his and Mum's reactions, but I'll let him tell you more about that. I didn't actually see his scores anyway. How did you do? I'd be willing to bet you aced your Defense exam, right? That's what I thought. How did you do on your Potions exam? That was the one you were worried about that you needed to become an auror, wasn't it?

Ron and I have been bugging Mum to let us go to Diagon Alley with her since we got our letters. I don't think we were having much of an effect on her, but then today at breakfast Ron got another owl from the school, this one naming him captain of the Quidditch team. Kind of odd how the notice came a day late and separate from his regular Hogwarts letter, don't you think? I wonder why that is... But anyway, after Mum found out and Ron begged to go to Diagon Alley to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies, Mum finally caved in. I wish you could come with us, but nobody seems willing to budge in the least bit where you're concerned. Sorry.

It will be nice to finally be able to get out of the house for a bit. Not that we have it nearly as bad as you, but I'm beginning to feel kind of caged in here, you know? I mean, we can go outside and all, but the wards around the house only extend so far, so we have to stay close to the house. That means the clearing we usually play Quidditch in is off limits. I've gone flying a bit around the house, but it's not the same. We don't have the space to really practice. Did your Quidditch ban get lifted? Or have you not heard about it yet? I can't imagine them not lifting it, but the ministry has done a lot I'd never imagine it doing. It'll be nice to have you back on the team.

Well, I've run out of things to talk about for the moment. Feel free to write me; you know you want to.

With love,

Ginny

Harry was glad to see that McGonagall had listened to his advice and named Ron the Quidditch captain. He realized that Ginny, like

Hermione, could be entirely too clever for her own good. She hinted that she thought that there was more to Ron being named captain than meets the eye, and she was quite right. But Harry hoped that Ron didn't make the same connections his sister had. Ron could be extremely jealous at the best of times. Harry didn't want to know what his friend would do if he knew that Harry had refused the captaincy and recommended Ron. A normal person might be grateful, but he could never tell with Ron. He tended to get jealous and resentful in that type of situation.

Harry got up from his desk to fetch another treat for Hedwig before returning to his desk to write a reply.

Dear Ginny,

Hedwig always did have good taste. I got my Hogwarts owl yesterday as well, complete with OWL results. I am happy to say that I think I did quite well. So well, in fact, that I will be taking all the classes I need to become an auror, Potions included. It's amazing how much easier the subject is when you don't have Snape and his band of Slytherins constantly berating and taunting and sabotaging you. Who would have thought that without all that I might not be half bad with potions? It's really not that different than cooking, and I have years of experience with that.

That's great to hear about Ron. He deserves to be captain. I've never met anyone more obsessed with the sport than he is, and he knows strategy a lot better than anybody else on the team as well. It was a good choice. My official stance is that I have no idea why his letter would arrive a day late and that you're too clever for your own and my own good. Just what I needed in my life, another woman who is going to see through everything I do. Anyway, McGonagall did say that my ban was lifted along with all the other ridiculous Educational Decrees the toad passed last year.

That's great that you guys will get to go to Diagon Alley with your mum. Don't feel too bad about me. This summer has been a lot better than some of the past ones. I've been getting out of the house regularly and keeping busy, plus I have those meetings with Remus, not to mention the additional pen pal. Barring the rocky start, I'd say

it's the best summer I've ever had, although I guess that doesn't really say all that much. It has been nice having you to write to this summer. Hermione and Ron are great, don't get me wrong, but Hermione can be too demanding and pushy and you can never trust that she won't pull a teacher card on you, and Ron just gets jealous too easily and has problems with his temper. I've yet to find any such faults in you, but I'll just have to keep my eyes open. Write again soon.

Take care,

Harry

Harry asked Hedwig if she would like to rest a bit before returning with his reply, but she stuck her leg out for the letter to be attached anyway. She nipped his finger in an affectionate way to signify that she appreciated being asked before she took off out the window and into the sky. Harry returned to his reading and spent the rest of the day either studying or practicing wandless magic.

That night, for the second time this summer, Harry was ripped from his training with Sirius and found himself in what appeared to be a cave, given the stone walls. He found himself standing before a single figure clad in black with a skull mask over its face. Harry was once again seeing things from Voldemort's point of view. Voldemort had been reading a letter, but by the time Harry was able to orient himself, he was already folding up the letter saying, "Very good, Lucius. You have served me well. Diagon Alley will be a suitable place to strike. Take as many as you need and plan the attack yourself. I want the boy and the girl alive, everyone else is fair game. Cause as much damage as you can. As long as you're there tomorrow, we might as well send the world a message."

"Yes my lord," Lucius Malfoy's silky voice replied.

"Let the owl deliver the letter. We don't want them to know where we got our information. And Lucius," Voldemort paused dramatically, "do not fail me this time."

The mask tilted forward as its occupant bowed his head slightly in acquiescence before turning abruptly and walking out of the room. Voldemort adopted a wicked grin, obviously pleased with this plan of his. After a moment he called out, "Wormtail!"

The disgusting rat of a man entered reluctantly, shuffling forward. "What do you have to say for yourself, Wormtail?"

"M-my lord," Wormtail responded shakily, "I have tried gaining access to the Weasleys' home and the Granger's home, but I cannot come close. They must have put wards up to keep me out. I'm sorry, master."

"You disappoint me, Wormtail," Voldemort replied icily. "You are outliving your usefulness. Well almost, I still have one use for you." Wormtail looked hopeful until he noticed the malevolent glare Voldemort was giving him, the same one he always gave before he cast "Crucio!"

Wormtail fell to the ground shrieking in agony, pain beyond pain coursing through his veins. Meanwhile across the country a boy shot awake in bed clutching his forehead and biting his lip to keep from screaming out in pain. Harry had hoped that his practice in Occlumency would rid him of these visions or at least decrease the intensity of the pain he felt as a result of them. He had no such luck.

Harry shakily crawled out of bed and over to his desk. The sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon, providing him enough light to see what he was doing. He scrambled for a quill, ink bottle, and piece of parchment where he hastily scribbled a note.

Sir,

Another vision. Attack today at Diagon Alley. They captured an owl on delivery, the plan is to capture a boy and girl, they didn't mention who, and to cause as much damage as possible. Wormtail has tried to get into the Burrow and Hermione's house but has been kept out presumably by wards.

HP

Harry looked around for his owl, cursing when he realized she was still out on delivery from last night. He had no choice but to wait for her to come back and hope that it was soon. She could usually tell when Harry needed her, so he hoped that she would realize his need and hurry back. In the meantime Harry opened up a book and began to read, hoping the activity would take his mind off the pulsing agony in his scar. The pain gradually faded away, but this soon after a vision it was still rather intense.

Sure enough, within half an hour Hedwig was swooping through the window with a hoot to announce her arrival. "Thank Merlin you're here, girl. I need you to take this to Professor Dumbledore right away. Take a rest when you get there, but hurry on your way back, Hedwig. The Death Eaters are capturing owls now, and the last thing I want is for them to get you."

She was gone without delay to deliver his message. He hoped she would be safe. He didn't want to imagine what the Death Eaters would do if they captured his owl. Needing an activity to take his mind off of his rough start to the morning, Harry put on his new workout clothes and went outside to start his jog. He was increasing his jog as the summer went along because his endurance was increasing the more he ran.

Today he ran a bit extra just for the physical release of his nerves. He spent a good deal of time working out after his jog as well, spending an inordinate amount of time at his cousin's punching bag. It was a really good way to relieve stress. After he finished, he jumped in the shower and cleaned himself off. When he reentered his room a strange sight greeted him.

Hedwig was flying through the window with Pig clutched in one of her talons. She seemed extremely agitated and exhausted; Pig looked much worse for wear. Both owls were frantic. For Pig that was nothing out of the ordinary, but Hedwig was normally calm and collected. She was flapping her wings and screeching bloody murder.

“Death Eaters...attack...Weasleys...trouble,” snippets of speech filled his consciousness. It seemed familiar. Then it hit him.

“Hedwig?” he asked a moment before transforming into the black owl.

“Harry, Pig was attacked. I found him on my way to Hogwarts. Death Eaters attacked him and read his letter. He says the Weasleys are in trouble,” the snowy white owl exclaimed in a rush.

Harry paused for half of a second before he made the connection to his vision and was in motion. He transformed back into human form and took the parchment attached to Pig’s leg and skimmed through it not taking in anything until he got to what he was dreading.

...going to Diagon Alley first thing in the morning. I can’t wait to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies...

“Why don’t you just send them an engraved invitation, Ron?” Harry asked into the air. He quickly dressed himself and changed his hair and put in his brown contact lenses. He used the same glamour charm to hide his scar again. He turned to Hedwig. “I need you to deliver that letter to Dumbledore as soon as possible. I’m going to try to apparate you to Hogsmeade, and you can deliver it from there, okay?”

He heard her hoot and a soft, “Okay,” in his mind. He shook his head, now was not the time to be thinking about mind speaking.

Harry held out his arm for Hedwig, and she complied by alighting on his forearm. He brought his forearm close to his chest and concentrated harder than ever before. He imagined himself in Hogsmeade with Hedwig clutched to his chest and disappeared with a small pop. When he reappeared he looked at his owl who had thankfully appeared with him completely whole and intact. “Hurry to Dumbledore, and rest for a bit once you get there, wait for him to get back. Be safe on your flight back. I don’t want you getting caught too.”

She nipped his ear gently and took off. Harry didn't hesitate a second before apparating to Diagon Alley. He found a deserted alley between buildings and changed into an owl. He rose into the sky and perched on a weather vane on top of one of the buildings to search through the streets for the familiar red hair that would mark his surrogate family. It only took him a minute to see Ron and his mother entering Quality Quidditch Supplies. A moment later he saw two other redheads down the street walking past Gringotts. He swooped towards them and found that the hair belonged to Ginny and Bill. Harry watched as they approached and went inside Magical Menagerie.

Harry took the opportunity to land in a secluded spot and revert to human form. He was just coming out of the alley as he noticed Ginny in the window of the shop, holding a tiny black kitten to her chest. The kitten looked out the window and Harry saw it had startlingly green eyes, much like his own. Bill walked over to his sister and said something, and she reluctantly put the kitten down. The two began walking out of the shop when it happened.

There was a series of pops that preceded screams of terror as the Death Eaters apparated into Diagon Alley. They appeared right in front of Gringotts and immediately noticed Bill and Ginny coming out of the shop next door. Half of them aimed their wands at the two, while the rest turned and went in the other direction. There were about ten wizards with their wands trained on the two Weasleys.

The rest of the alley was in chaos. People were running around frantically with no destination in mind screaming in terror. The entire street was pandemonium while the two Weasleys were caught like deer in headlights staring down the wands of the Death Eaters. As the black clad figures began to cast spells, Harry jumped into action. He drew his magic up inside and threw a shield towards Ginny, knowing she was one of their targets. The shield succeeded in blocking the spells directed at Ginny, who was just now pulling her wand out of her robes, but it was unable to help the debris falling from the reductor curse that was cast over their heads onto the building directly behind them.

Ginny scrambled away and dove to the ground, coming up in a bit of a roll. As she stood, she limped on her left ankle, having twisted it in her little bout of acrobatics. The Death Eaters, in the meantime, were on the move, closing in on the duo. Bill was separated from his sister by the fallen rock and was busy fighting for his own life. Harry stunned several of the Death Eaters from behind as Ginny held off two of them on her own. She did not see the Death Eaters sneaking up behind her, however.

She was quickly disarmed. The Death Eater grabbed hold of her and began dragging her off into one of the alleys. She struggled, but the Death Eater had a solid hold on her, plus he was at least twice her size. Harry acted without thinking. Before he knew it he was a panther, running full speed after her. He entered the alleyway to find the Death Eater still dragging a struggling Ginny. Further down the alley was another figure clad in black waiting for them.

Harry streaked down the alley toward Ginny and leapt up onto some boxes stacked up next to the building on his left side. With a powerful push, he leapt over the Death Eater and was human before he touched the ground. With one arm extended toward the back of the Death Eater holding Ginny and the other aimed at the one at the end of the alley, Harry cast twin stupefies, rendering both opponents unconscious before they knew what hit them.

Harry summoned their wands and snapped them, having read that the best way to permanently disable an opponent without killing was to remove their main weapon. In that moment he was glad he had taken to reading so much this summer. He finished it off with incarcerous spells to bind the Death Eaters. Once finished he turned his attention toward Ginny who was staring at him wide eyed.

“Give me your hand, Gin. Quickly, there’s no time. I have to get you out of here and check on the others,” Harry said urgently.

Ginny only continued to stare, so Harry took the initiative. He grabbed hold of her shoulders and said, “It’s ok. You’re safe with me,” before drawing her in close to his chest and disappearing with a pop. He reappeared outside the Burrow and said, “Please, when you tell people what happened, don’t tell them about my wandless abilities. I

don't want anyone getting any more curious about me than they already will be. Now get inside. I'll make sure the rest make it home."

Ginny ran towards the house without delay. After a moment she turned back to thank her rescuer, but he had already vanished without making a sound. She turned back toward the house and rushed inside to wait for the rest of her family.

When Harry got back to Diagon Alley, the tide was already turning on the Death Eaters. Bill was finishing off a Death Eater who collapsed next to a couple of his brethren. Down the street Harry saw Dumbledore disarming and tying up a group of Death Eaters that had surrounded Ron and his mum. Harry sighed with relief at the scene. The battle was over, and everyone was safe.

Harry let a small smile grace his lips before he disappeared and reappeared in his room. He looked at the clock and realized he hadn't been gone for a full ten minutes. That had to have been one of the most frantic ten minutes of his life, though.

OoOoO

While Harry was relaxing in his bed after a job well done, the people in Diagon Alley were frantic despite the elimination of the threat. Everyone was surprised when all of the captured Death Eaters suddenly disappeared from right under their noses. The silver lining on the clouds had just been ripped away, leaving nothing but the dark, foreboding gray.

Bill was beside himself. Ginny was his responsibility, and he had no idea what had happened to her. They had been separated when the building came down upon them. He was so busy dueling Death Eaters that he hadn't even seen what had happened to her. She was gone without a trace, and it was all his fault.

Mrs. Weasley was almost hysterical when Bill told her that Ginny was missing. After a minute she managed to compose herself enough to begin thinking clearly, though tears were still flowing freely down her cheeks. The first order of business was to get Ron home. She took him by the arm and led him to the Leaky Cauldron to floo home,

despite his protests that he wanted to stay and help search for his sister. She followed after him through the fireplace to make sure he didn't try to come right back through.

As she came through the hearth, relief poured through her at the sight that met her. Ron was hugging a surprised Ginny so tight it looked like her eyes might bulge out of their sockets. He was asking a hundred questions without giving her a chance to respond. Mrs. Weasley quickly closed the distance between them and engulfed both children into one of her bone-crunching hugs exclaiming, "Thank Merlin!"

"Mum, Ron," Ginny wheezed, "I can't breathe."

The two Weasleys let go, looking sheepish but unapologetic. There was only a moment of silence before Ginny spoke again, "What happened? Is everyone okay?"

"Yes, everyone's fine, just worried half to death that you were taken captive," Mrs. Weasley replied. "Oh, Bill!" she shrieked before turning and heading back through the fireplace in a swirl of green flames.

It was only a long minute before Mrs. Weasley returned with Bill, and Ginny found herself yet again the subject of a life threatening hug. "What is it with you people? You find me safe at home, so you try to squeeze the life out of me?" Ginny asked breathlessly.

"You scared us half to death," Bill replied.

"Yeah, how did you make it back here?" Ron asked.

Ginny's grin faded for a second as she thought back to how close she had come to being captured. She sat down and urged the others to do so before telling her story.

"After the building collapsed, I rolled out of the way and think I twisted my ankle. Anyway, I came up and started battling the Death Eaters in front of me. There were three of them approaching, and I

managed to stun one while holding off the other two, but I got snuck up on and disarmed from behind,” Ginny explained.

“He started dragging me off into an alleyway while I was struggling to get free. I couldn’t see where we were going because I had my back to him. Anyway, as we’re going through the alley, this cat comes streaking through. And I’m not talking about a house cat, this was a jungle cat, like a panther or something. It leapt over our heads, and the next thing I know, the man holding me is slumped on the ground unconscious. I turn around, and there’s a man, couldn’t have been more than a couple years older than me, conjuring ropes that tied themselves around the one holding me and another Death Eater at the end of the alley.”

“He came up to me, told me I was safe, and grabbed hold of my shoulders and pulled me in to his chest. The next thing I know, we’re right outside the Burrow. He told me to run inside and that he’d make sure everyone else made it home okay. I turned around to say thanks, but he had already left. So I ran inside and waited in front of the fire for you guys, and here we are now,” Ginny finished her story with a sigh.

She had respected his wishes and not mentioned his wandless abilities, but she was still highly curious about it. There was something altogether familiar about him. When he was in his panther form, the eyes had really stuck out at her. They were startlingly green, just like the kitten she had been looking at...just like Harry. The man didn’t resemble anyone she knew, though. He had blondish brown hair and brown eyes. He was probably about average height, definitely not Ron’s height, but Ron was abnormally tall. And he was slightly muscular as well. When he had grabbed her and held her to him when he apparated, she could feel the muscles underneath his shirt. She had felt safe in his arms, just as he had said she would be.

“Well, whoever he was, thank Merlin he was there to help,” Mrs. Weasley spoke after a moment of silence. “Did he tell you his name?” she directed toward Ginny.

“No, he didn’t even give me a first name. But he knew my name,” she explained. She finished softly to herself, “He called me Gin, almost as if he knew me.” She didn’t tell the others that. He had seemed like he wanted his identity to remain secret, and she would respect his wishes. It was the least she could do after he had saved her life.

OoOoO

Hedwig returned later that evening with a letter addressed to Harry in long, loopy handwriting. The headmaster had written back to him.

Harry,

Much as I hate the manner in which we received the information, your vision and prompt letter to me saved the lives of your friends today. The targets for the attack were Ronald and Ginevra Weasley. It seems your friend Ron wrote you a letter late last night and sent it with his owl to let you know he and his family were going to Diagon Alley today. We were able to respond before the alarms alerted us to the attack, thanks to your letter, and we managed to stop the attack before they were able to fulfill their purpose. The Weasleys are all safe once again, and there were no known casualties during the attack.

There was some damage done at the alley but none that cannot be easily repaired. Thank you for alerting me of your vision when you did. You have saved countless lives. Nevertheless, the fact that you are still having visions worries me. I will be glad when you resume your Occlumency lessons, but might I suggest that you spend the rest of your summer trying to prepare yourself for those lessons? The more effort you put in to protecting your mind, the harder it will be for anyone to break into it. As always, I will be here if you need anything.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry read through the letter and was pleased overall with its contents. No one was seriously hurt or killed in the attack. Diagon

Alley would be put back to normal soon enough. The only real ramification from the attack would be the response from the public, but it could be as good as bad. Now that Voldemort had really threatened the people in general, they would not stand for the ministry's lack of action. Now was the time to start fighting back.

Harry fed his owl some treats in gratitude for her help today. He fed Pig a treat as well. The small owl had apparently decided to rest a bit before heading back to the Burrow. Considering the fact that Death Eaters had already intercepted him once, Harry couldn't really blame the owl.

The next day Harry returned to Diagon Alley to find ministry personnel scattered throughout the streets helping with the cleanup. He walked over the Magical Menagerie which was mostly put back together from the attack the day before. It was open at any rate, so Harry went inside. He quickly spotted what he had come for, a small black kitten with bright green eyes. Harry picked it up and scratched it behind the ears. It purred happily and rubbed its face against his hand. He walked over to the shop owner and asked what he would need to buy to care for a cat.

The man collected the magical equivalent of a litter box, where the waste vanished after it was deposited by the animal. He stacked some cat food, and Harry told him to give him enough food to last for a year. He didn't know if there was a shop in Hogsmeade that sold pet food, so he thought it would be best to be prepared. The man had grinned at that and was only too happy to oblige. He had asked if Harry wanted any toys or catnip for the kitten to play with, so Harry selected a couple toys and picked up a bag of catnip as well.

The last thing he needed for the little critter was a carrying case. The man fetched one for Harry, and tallied up all of his purchases. Harry paid the man, retrieving the exact amount out of his money bag before depositing the kitten in the carry case and putting all the food and other accessories in his trunk. With that settled he walked out the door and disappeared with a pop, his business concluded.

Ginny's birthday was coming up, and after seeing her with the kitten the day before, he couldn't resist. Besides, after the scare she must

have gotten the day before during the attack, she could probably use something to cheer her up. He was surprised that he remembered her birthday at all and was rather proud of the fact. The only reason he knew was because he had been there when they celebrated her birthday the summer before his second year. He hadn't sent her anything for any of her birthdays, so he was surprised that he remembered the date four years later.

Harry decided to keep the kitten in the rooms inside his trunk so that it didn't manage to sneak out into the rest of the house. He made sure to spend some time with it every day and showered it with attention. Harry was glad that Hedwig couldn't see him when he was in the trunk; otherwise, she would probably be quite jealous of the attention the little kitten was getting.

He realized that he hadn't really spent much time at all in his trunk's rooms. He inspected the kitchen area and decided that he really should take advantage of his resources. He always hated eating with the Dursley's and really avoided it as much as he could. He had forgotten that he had a kitchen of his own at his disposal. He still had some muggle money left over from his excursion into muggle London, not much, but he figured it would be enough to get a few groceries to stock his kitchen. So he did.

After a couple days he went back to Gringotts to get more money, then returned to the grocery store to buy even more supplies. He rather enjoyed having his own kitchen. With the kitten around, he was spending quite a bit of time in his trunk, keeping her company. So he was taking almost all his meals in there now, and he liked not having to worry about encountering his relatives. He found he didn't really mind cooking for himself. He had hated the chore when doing it for his relatives, but that was mostly because he'd cook their food, but would hardly get any of it. They rarely ever gave him enough to eat his fill even though he was the one making the food.

Soon enough, the morning of Ginny's birthday arrived. After his morning jog and workout, Harry packed up all of the cat's supplies. He put the kitten, which he hadn't yet named, leaving the honor to Ginny, into its carrier. He looked at Hedwig and realized she would

have a time getting all of this to the Burrow. He quickly thought up a plan, wrote a letter to Ginny, and gathered everything together.

He told his owl his plan, and she flew onto his shoulder and nibbled gently on his ear to show that she understood and was willing to help. Harry concentrated hard on the forest surrounding the burrow and soundlessly found himself there with cat carrier and supplies in hand and his owl on his shoulder. He picked a spot that Ron had shown him several summers before that was quite a bit away from the house, figuring that if they were all stuck in the wards, no one would be anywhere nearby. Smiling to himself, Harry put all of the parcels down and turned to his owl. She grabbed hold of the cat carrier while Harry changed into a black owl and grabbed the supplies. The two slowly lifted up into the air and flew towards the Burrow.

Hedwig led the way, though Harry found that he could sense which way he needed to go to find Ginny. 'Must be how owls always find the recipient of their post,' he thought to himself. He resolved to ask Hedwig about it later. Ginny was in her bedroom, still in bed. Hedwig took charge, tapping at the window to get her attention. She turned groggily to the window and jumped out of bed with a start. She rushed over to the window and let the white owl in. She was surprised when a black owl followed in as well.

"What's all this you've got here," she asked Hedwig. She let out a squeak when the kitten poked its head out of the carrier. "Oh, it's you! Come here you beautiful little thing," she exclaimed, pulling the kitten out and hugging it to her chest. Hedwig hooted indignantly to gain her attention. "Oh, I'm sorry Hedwig, I didn't mean to ignore you," she placated the owl, stroking her feathers as she still held the kitten close in her other arm.

"And who is this we have here?" she asked the room generally as she looked toward Harry. She was struck silent for a moment as she came face to face with the third animal in a week that had those brilliant green eyes. "I don't think I've ever seen you before. What's your name?" Harry hooted in reply; Ginny grinned and returned with, "Well that won't do. Every owl I meet tells me its name is hoot."

Hedwig hooted again and stuck out her leg towards Ginny. She took the letter and sat on the bed, kitten still clutched to her as she tore open the letter with one hand. She began reading while absentmindedly stroking the kitty.

Dear Ginny,

Happy Birthday! The present you gave me meant so much to me that I wanted to do something special for you. You mentioned how much you wanted a pet of your own, and I remembered how much you love cats, so I managed to buy you this little kitten. She doesn't have a name yet as I figured you might like to name her, so give her a good one.

You might be wondering about the second owl, he's a friend that Hedwig seems to have made this summer. He comes to visit every once in awhile and is pretty friendly, so you don't need to be afraid of him. Don't be offended if he refuses owl treats, though. He won't accept any from me either. I haven't named him or anything, as he isn't really mine, so I don't know what to call him. I enlisted his help because I bought you all the supplies you'll need for the kitten that I'm guessing you have sitting in your lap right now. It should be enough food to last you a year, there's a magical litter box, some toys, and a bag of catnip. Everything you need to keep your new kitten happy.

I heard about the excitement you all had at Diagon Alley the other day. I'm sorry you were all in danger and that I've made you all targets. I promise to do everything I can to help prepare you and Ron this year so that you'll be able to better protect yourselves. I don't think I would ever be able to forgive myself if anything happened to any of you.

I wish I could be with you to celebrate your birthday, but I'm sure your family will more than make up for my absence. Forget about everything happening in the world today, and just focus on having the best birthday you can. That's what I told myself on my birthday, and it worked out pretty well. There's nothing you can do to help today, but you can take the day to enjoy yourself and remember all that is worth fighting for.

Keep the kitty company, she absolutely loves the attention. She was monopolizing my time for the little while that I had her. I think Hedwig was becoming jealous. She loves being scratched behind her ears and will play with you all day if you let her. I hope you like her. Have a very happy birthday, Gin.

Take care,

Harry

Ginny's eyes were shining as she finished reading the letter. Harry really could be the sweetest guy in the world, and he probably had no idea he was even doing it. How he had managed to buy the kitten, let alone pick out the one she had absolutely fallen in love with the moment she saw it in the Magical Menagerie, was beyond her. Ginny glanced back at the letter. He had called her Gin which she couldn't ever remember him doing before. It reminded her of the man that had saved her life, but she quickly pushed that thought out of her mind.

She stood up from her bed and looked down at the kitten in her arms. She was curled up in the crook of her arm against her chest and appeared to be sleeping. Ginny carefully made her way across the room and offered Hedwig an owl treat. With all the correspondence Ginny had been doing with Harry this summer, she kept a small stock of treats in her room now. She offered one to the mystery owl as well, but as Harry had said, the owl shook its head and turned its neck slightly away to signify that he wasn't interested.

Ginny shrugged and gave the second treat to Hedwig as well. She looked through all the supplies that the black owl had brought. There was a ton of food, the litter box he had talked about, a bag of catnip, and a couple toys. She thanked both owls profusely and asked "Can you guys hang out for a little bit? I want to go show off this precious little kitten and then write Harry a reply, okay?"

Hedwig hooted her acquiescence right away, so Ginny turned her attention to Harry. He thought about it for a second before hooting and bobbing his head slightly. Ginny shot them both a wide smile and said, "Thanks, I'll be back in a few." And then she was gone.

She carefully made her way down the stairs so as not to disturb the sleeping bundle of black fur in her arms. She walked into the kitchen and was greeted by a chorus of "Happy Birthday" from all occupants of the room. The kitten's head shot up at the unexpected noise, and she shot out of Ginny's arms and out of the room before the red haired birthday girl could react. "Oh, you scared her away," Ginny huffed.

"Scared what away?" someone asked, Ginny didn't pay attention to whom the voice belonged.

"My kitten," Ginny replied. "I haven't named her yet. Now I'll have to go find where she's hiding."

"Where did you get a kitten, dear?" her mother asked.

"Oh," Ginny's cheeks tinged the faintest shade of pink, a testament to how composed she had become over the years. "Harry sent her to me...for my birthday," Ginny explained as she turned on her heel and strode out of the room in search of her kitten.

A few minutes later, Ginny coaxed the black ball of fur out from under the couch and once again let her curl up in her arms. She began thinking of names for her as she walked back into the kitchen.

"So Harry sent you that kitten, eh?" Fred asked.

"Mighty nice of him, that was," George added.

"Indeed, he is quite thoughtful, wouldn't say George?"

"Why, I would say so, Fred."

"Quite the catch, that one."

"Oh yes, he's simply dreamy."

"Why if we weren't sure he didn't swing that way –"

“–and we are sure aren’t we, Fred?”

“Pretty sure, my good twin.”

“Alas, if only things were different, we’d be vying for his attention.”

“We wouldn’t mind sharing, mind you –“

“–after all, we’re sure he’s plenty man to handle the both of us.”

“Cut it out, you two,” Mrs. Weasley admonished her sons. Ginny meanwhile had largely ignored their banter and was now trying to eat her breakfast with her one free hand. The other arm was still holding the kitten in her lap, scratching behind her ears as Harry had suggested. After scarfing down her breakfast as fast as she could handle one handedly, she scrambled away from the table and back to the stairway.

“Well I’m off to write Harry a reply. The owls are upstairs in my room waiting for me,” she explained to her family. She ascended the stairs and stopped off on the first floor, immediately heading back to her room. She laid the kitten down on her bed where she scratched it some more while thinking up a name for her. She finally decided on Emerald. She’d call her Em for short.

“What do you think, Em?” she asked her kitten. “Will Emerald do for you?” The kitten purred affectionately into Ginny’s hand in reply, which Ginny took as a yes. With that settled she left Em on her bed with one of her toys and walked over to her desk. She sat down to write a reply.

After a few minutes of writing, she stopped and tapped that quill against the parchment for a minute. After rubbing her chin for a moment in thought, she crumpled up the parchment and started over. Harry would have laughed if he was capable of doing so in owl form. He was tempted to retrieve the discarded parchment from her trash bin but decided against it. He didn’t want to arouse any suspicion, and it really wouldn’t be right of him to invade her privacy like that.

Several more minutes passed before Ginny signed her name, finishing the letter. She tucked it into an envelope and wrote Harry's name. Turning to the two owls perched on the windowsill, she asked, "So which one of you wants to take this?"

Hedwig hooted and stuck her leg out, signifying that she would be the one to take the letter. It made sense since she was Harry's owl. Ginny thanked both of the owls and appreciatively stroked both of their feathers. Harry felt a little awkward at the attention but found that he rather enjoyed it in an odd sort of way. He hooted his thanks in reply, and the two owls took off out of the window.

Harry and Hedwig flew together the entire way back to Privet Drive. They spoke to each other throughout their flight. Harry asked her about her ability to always find the recipients of the letters he sent out, and she explained that she didn't really know how she knew where to go, she could just tell which way to go instinctually. This just confirmed what he had thought when he was delivering the cat supplies to Ginny. As they approached his neighborhood, Harry split off from Hedwig and reverted to human form before apparating into his bedroom. He didn't want any of the Order members who were keeping tabs on him to see the black owl entering his room. Moments later Hedwig arrived bearing the letter he had just watched Ginny write. He took the proffered letter and tore it open to read its contents.

Dear Harry,

Thank you so much. I love her. Her name is Emerald because of her beautiful green eyes. I'm calling her Em for short. Did you get her from the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley? That's where I was when we were attacked, and I had fallen in love with this kitten with brilliant green eyes as soon as I walked in. How did you know? And for that matter, how did you manage to get her, considering you're in lockdown with your relatives? Well regardless of how you managed it, thank you so much. She is quite possibly the best present I have ever been given.

I was advised not to write much about what happened at Diagon Alley, so you'll have to wait until I see you for all the details. But I guarantee

you that it's quite the story. I'll tell you all about it on the train ride. Since I'm not a prefect I'll be able to sit with you while Ron and Hermione are off in their little meeting; that is of course assuming you'd like to sit with me on the train.

You really didn't have to buy me all of that stuff to go along with Em, but I appreciate it. I know you have a lot of money and like to spend it on others. And I won't let you spend all of your money on me all the time, but I might just let you get away with it every once in awhile. I know that your money has always been a sore spot between you and Ron, but I could care less either way. I know you've got it, and I don't. And I know that you're not averse to spending it on others, and I promise not to get offended by it. I know you're not trying to buy friendships or anything silly like that. That doesn't mean I'll always accept it, but I won't ever throw it back in your face.

Hedwig's friend was quite striking. I don't think I've ever seen a black owl before. But then again, I think Hedwig is the only white owl I've ever seen, so maybe they make a good match. Do you think maybe they're a little more than friendly? Might we be finding some black and white owls flying around the Potter household soon? You never know. It's proper to save yourself for marriage, of course, but Hedwig has always seemed a bit promiscuous if you ask me. You'll have to watch out for her. Sure he may seem nice and honorable, but they all do at first glance. Then once they get what they want, their true colors show, and you realize that it was all just an act. Men!

Thanks again for Em, Harry. And I think I just might take your advice. Today's a day for me to enjoy, and I might as well take advantage while I still can. I've got a new kitten to play with, and my family is all here to share the day with me. Today will be a good day. Write again soon.

With love,

Ginny

Harry burst out laughing while reading the letter. Just imagining what must be going through her head. Just thinking of him and Hedwig together...like that...was downright disturbing, but also absolutely

hilarious. She had no idea what she was saying, of course, but that didn't lessen the amusement Harry got from her comments.

The rest of his summer vacation was pretty normal for Harry. His scar acted up on him a couple times. It only twinged with pain and gave him some vague flashes of Voldemort's emotions. He didn't have another vision. He wrote to both Ron and Hermione about his OWLs and what classes he would be taking and everything. They both wrote to him about the same. Ron mentioned the attack in Diagon Alley and how stupid he felt for including when they'd be going in his letter. Harry was inclined to agree but chose not to vocalize that thought. He and Ginny also wrote back and forth to each other talking about various things.

About a week after Ginny's birthday, Harry received a letter from Dumbledore with the Hogwarts seal emblazoned upon the envelope. He tore it open and read the contents.

Dear Harry,

I have recently met with the staff of Hogwarts and, as promised, am now informing you of our decision on your status in regards to the DA. Given the success of your club last year and the remarkable scores your students received on their exams in comparison to other students, in addition to evidence Professor McGonagall presented at the level of commitment you seem to be putting into the club, we have decided to offer you the post of Assistant Professor.

The post has several privileges and responsibilities attached. If you so desire, you would be given your own quarters and your own office. You would be welcome to continue using the Room of Requirement for your classes, or, if you would prefer, we could arrange for a classroom to be setup for you. You would have authority over your peers, including the Head Boy and Girl, but all of the staff would still have complete authority over you except during your DA meetings where you would be equals. There are other privileges included like the ability to access the Restricted Section of the library and an extended curfew as well.

As I mentioned, as an Assistant Professor you would have authority over the other students. You will be expected to treat this authority responsibly and not abuse it in any way. You will have the ability to take and award house points and give out detentions, but if it is found that you are abusing this power, it will be stripped from you. We expect you to treat all students equally regardless of any personal feuds or of which house they are from.

You also may be asked for assistance by our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He may ask for help in some of his classes, in evaluating the students, or in offering additional tutoring to students who are struggling. He is not used to the demands of professorship and has expressed interest in having an assistant, which is a large part of the reason we are offering such a position to you. I will ensure that none of his demands conflict with your own studies, of course.

As you might have imagined, this decision was not unanimous among the staff. I will warn you, you will be watched closely, both by the staff and the students. If you reach out to people of all houses, I think it could go a long way to creating inter-house unity which the school has not enjoyed in hundreds of years. There will always be some who refuse to cooperate, but you must not let the few ruin it for the many. I will await your decision on whether or not you would like to accept the post and what accommodations we should make for you. I feel I should mention that while there have been many assistant professors in the past, only once has the position ever been held by a student. You are the second person in the history of the school to receive that honor. I trust you will not let us down.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry didn't know what he was expecting from Dumbledore, but this was definitely not it. He had briefly thought he might be made an honorary prefect or something, but he had put it out of his mind deciding that he really had no idea what the old man would come up with. Never in a million years would he have predicted this. He had no doubt who the headmaster was speaking of when he mentioned that the decision was not unanimous. Snape would have fought this to the

bitter end, but to have it go through must have meant that he had the support of the rest of the staff.

He guessed that Professor McGonagall had showed them all the letter he had sent her turning down the Quidditch captaincy. He couldn't think of anything else that she could present as evidence to the level of commitment he was putting forth. Harry hated the fact that this would further alienate him from his classmates. He wanted nothing more than to be normal, but he had realized long ago that he was anything but normal. And continuing to deny the fact would only make things harder. So he was left with only one choice really: he had to take it.

He didn't want to be separated from his friends though, so he decided to turn down the separate quarters, but accepted the office. He told the Headmaster that he would like to continue using the Room of Requirement as it would provide him with everything he would ever need throughout the semester, making life easier for him. Harry sent a reply back informing him of his decision and thanking him for the opportunity. He told him that he was almost finished writing up the magical contract he would use for the club and that it should be ready for him to look over by the time he arrived on September the 1st.

With that out of the way, Harry turned his attention to more immediate concerns. He had been debating with himself for the past couple days over the card that Jessica had given him when he had been shopping in muggle London. She had said to call if he ever needed help shopping again but not to be afraid to call even if it wasn't about shopping. He didn't imagine himself to be an expert when it came to girls, but he thought for sure that this was a hint that she wanted him to call, maybe to ask her out. He wasn't really sure.

He finally asked himself, "What would it hurt if I did call and she wasn't interested? I'd never have to see her again. It's not like at Hogwarts where I'd see her every day." And so with his resolve strengthened, Harry snuck out of his room and down the stairs. He headed into the kitchen and made sure the coast was clear before he snatched the cordless phone out of its holder and retreated back to his room. He locked the door magically since all the physical locks

were on the outside and put up a privacy ward to prevent anybody from eavesdropping.

He dialed her number and waited while the phone rang. After a few rings someone picked up.

“Hello,” a female voice greeted him.

“Hi,” Harry replied nervously. “Is Jessica there?”

“Speaking,” she responded.

“Oh,” Harry answered as he began pacing back and forth. “Hi Jessica. I’m not sure if you remember me, but my name’s Harry, and you helped me with my shopping a week or so back and left me with your number.”

“Hi Harry,” she interrupted cheerfully. “It’s good to hear from you. I was wondering whether or not you’d call.”

“So you did want me to call then?” Harry half asked, half stated.

“Of course I did. Why else would I give you my number,” she giggled softly.

“Oh, right,” he said. “Well you had said that I could call you even if I didn’t have more shopping to do...”

“Uh huh”

“...so I thought I would take you up on your offer. I know we hardly know each other and everything, and I’m not sure if you’d like to or not, but I was wondering if maybe you’d...if you’d maybe like to...” Harry stammered.

“Are you trying to ask me out on a date Harry?” she asked helpfully.

Harry slapped himself on the forehead for being such a dork.
“Err...maybe?”

“Maybe yes? Or maybe no?” she asked candidly.

“ Yes. Would you like to get dinner with me sometime?” he deadpanned, forcing his nerves out of his throat.

“I’d like that,” she answered sweetly with a slight giggle.

“You would?” Harry asked dumbly. “I mean, you would. That’s great. Umm...when would you like to go out?”

“How about this Saturday?” she supplied.

“Saturday.” Harry said. “Okay, Saturday works.”

“Will you be picking me up, Harry?” she asked.

“Oh, well I don’t exactly have a car or anything,” he explained.

“That’s alright. Would you like to meet me somewhere?” she asked supportively.

“Sure,” he replied. “Where would we meet?”

“Do you know your way around London?” she asked.

“Err, not really,” he answered.

“Okay, why don’t you meet me in front of the store at say 6:00? I know of a place nearby that we could go to,” she explained. “Will that be okay with you, Harry?”

“Yes. Yes, that would be wonderful,” he responded gratefully.

“Good. I’ll look forward to seeing you at 6:00 on Saturday then,” she told him.

“I’ll look forward to seeing you too,” he responded back. Then a thought struck him. “What should I wear? I mean, what kind of attire should I wear for the restaurant?”

She giggled softly again. “A very good question, Harry. I’m proud. Most guys wouldn’t think to ask. Wear one of the nice khaki pants, a collared shirt, and your brown shoes and you’ll be just fine.”

“Thanks,” he said, constructing a mental picture of his new clothing and what he’d wear.

“You’re welcome. I’ll see on Saturday then. Bye Harry,” she said.

“Bye Jessica,” Harry answered before hanging up the phone and collapsing on his bed. That was nerve racking, it was. Girls should come with a manual or a cheat sheet, something. But it didn’t go too badly, he thought optimistically. Of course that was all thanks to Jessica. He had been a nervous wreck, but she was calm and collected and was helping him out whenever he stumbled. She seemed very cool like that. She didn’t seem to mind that he got nervous or stumbled over his words.

For the rest of the week Harry was bursting to tell everyone about his date. He wished he had people in his life that he could tell things to. But at least he had Sirius. Sirius was the one person he could tell everything, all of his secrets, to. Sure Sirius was dead and only visited in his dreams, but it was still nice to have that one person he could share himself with. He loved his friends and Remus and everyone, but there was so much he couldn’t tell any of them. He just got himself a date, but he couldn’t mention it to his friends because it would raise way too many questions. He didn’t hesitate to mention it to Sirius, though, and was teased mercilessly for it as a result.

His training went poorly for the next couple days as all his godfather had to do was bring up his date or make some suggestive comment and Harry would become distracted. After the second night of this torment, he put a lock on his emotions and no longer let himself become preoccupied with anything but dueling Sirius. And Sirius paid

for his taunts. Harry won most of their duels now, with his godfather only winning an occasional one or two. They were usually all well fought, though, and were very good practice for Harry. They also spent a lot of time working on new spells, some of which were ones Harry was reading about, others were ones Sirius would teach to him. His repertoire of spells was increasing rapidly from all of the extra study and training time.

Saturday finally rolled around, and Harry was a nervous wreck for most of the day. His run was extra long as was his bout with his cousin's punching bag, but it still didn't settle his nerves. He had to force himself to eat lunch and only managed a small amount of food. He wondered how he was going to manage to eat later tonight when he was already having trouble with food.

The day passed by slowly, inching along as he read his books and practiced his magic. He was beginning to practice casting two spells at once. He started off practicing with the same spell, but he was starting to try casting two different spells at the same time. He was having mixed results with it but was optimistic. Today, however, he was having trouble getting it right when using the same spell.

He was ready to go at 5:00. He needed to go to Diagon Alley and into Gringotts before his date so that he'd have muggle money to pay with. He changed his hair color, put in his brown contacts and cast a cosmetic charm over his scar. He checked himself in the mirror before leaving and was satisfied with the results. Even looking up close he couldn't tell that he had a scar. It blended in perfectly.

He apparated to Diagon Alley and walked quickly into the bank. He got in the line that Griphook had directed him to in order to exchange wizarding for muggle money the last time he was there. He stood in line for 10 minutes before he was helped by the goblin at the counter. He changed 50 galleons for about 250 pounds and bid the goblin a good day. He received little more than a grunt in reply as he turned and walked out of the bank.

He made his way through the busy crowd in the streets toward the Leaky Cauldron. He had plenty of time, so he would walk to the store. He made it to the pub without incident and was soon walking out the

exit into the muggle streets. He began his trek toward the department store. He stopped off in an alley along the way and hid himself as he changed his hair color to black and replaced his brown contacts with the clear ones. His hair length on a normal day was only a touch shorter than it was now. By the time the 1st of September came around, he'd have his hair this length for good.

He continued walking towards the store, taking his time, knowing that he was still early. He took stock of his surroundings and marveled at the hustle and bustle of the world. People were going every which way, everyone in a hurry. Cars sped down the streets as people traversed the sidewalks walking at speeds more closely resembling a jog. All the while Harry took his time to enjoy his walk and settle his nerves as he prepared for his date. Before long he was coming up to the store.

He saw a clock in the window and saw that he was 25 minutes early. With nothing better to do, Harry entered the store and sat on a bench near the door. He watched the shoppers and store employees as they all set about their tasks. Some shoppers seemed to just be browsing casually while others seemed intent on finding clothing that suited them. Some of the employees were greeting customers cheerfully and offering assistance, a few greeted the shoppers with less cheer and more grumpiness, but offered help nonetheless. Still others seemed to be in charge of restocking the shelves and racks of the clothes that were disappearing of them. They seemed to be the least cheerful of all the workers, but Harry couldn't blame them. The job did seem rather boring.

After a short while he saw her; she was leading a customer toward one of the registers. Their eyes met briefly, and she gave him a small smile as he gave her a casual wave. She returned his greeting and tilted her head toward her customers and held up one finger to let him know she'd be with him in a minute after she finished helping the shoppers. She rung them out cheerfully and bid them a goodnight. They replied in kind. She then sauntered toward Harry, so he got up and met her halfway.

"Hi," he greeted.

“Hey,” she said back. “You’re early.”

“I know,” he replied sheepishly. “I didn’t want to be late, so I gave myself plenty of time.”

“That was sweet of you,” she told him. She glanced at a watch on her wrist. “I still have ten more minutes until I can punch out. Are you alright just hanging out here ‘til then?”

“Oh,” Harry responded, “yeah, that’s fine. I’ll be right here whenever you’re ready to go. Take your time though. I’m not in a rush or anything.”

She gave him a full smile in return and said “Thanks. I’ll try not to keep you waiting too long.” And with that she turned and headed back into the store. Harry returned to his bench and continued his people watching. He also used the time he had to focus on controlling his emotions. He didn’t want to be a stammering wreck the entire night and was hoping that his Occlumency practice would help in that respect.

It was about fifteen minutes later that Jessica walked back towards him. She had changed, he noticed immediately. She had been wearing a cotton skirt before, red in color, with a white blouse. Now she was wearing a black skirt that seemed to be a more silky material. It had some white flowery designs on it. She was wearing a light blue top that came down in a V over her chest.

“Shall we?” she asked.

“You look beautiful,” he told her without registering what she had asked. She shot him a dazzling smile as a reward, and Harry’s brain took another moment to catch up with him. “Err, right, I’m ready to go.”

She giggled softly again, and Harry found he rather liked the sound. It wasn’t like when girls like Lavender or Parvati giggled while gossiping at Hogwarts. That was a louder, more intimidating laugh. Jessica’s giggle was soft and...inviting. He decided that anything he did to

make her laugh like that was worth it, even if he did look stupid as a result. "Thank you, Harry. You look rather dashing yourself."

Harry blushed brilliantly at the unexpected compliment. "Well, a woman with impeccable taste helped me pick it out," he managed to say without stammering one bit.

She giggled again, and Harry mentally congratulated himself for accomplishing that without making an idiot of himself. He opened the door for her and waved her through it. She smiled at him as she passed and whispered, "Thanks," as she walked out into the street. Harry followed her out the door and looked at her for direction. "Right. It's over this way," she explained gesturing to the right. Harry followed her lead, and they walked side by side down the street.

"So how is the job going?" Harry asked her conversationally.

"Oh, it's going alright," she replied. "I haven't had many cute guys coming in spending hundreds of pounds and leaving me enormous tips lately though, so it could be better."

Harry chuckled sheepishly at her joke, shrugging slightly. "You really did save my life that day, you know. I think I'd still be wandering around the store looking for clothes if it weren't for your help."

She looked over at him and met his eyes for a moment and knew that he was being honest. "It was my pleasure, really," she told him. "As I said, it's not every day I get a customer like you. And it's not every day that I actually enjoy myself so much while on the job. Ah, here we are," she said, gesturing toward the Italian restaurant in front of them. "I hope you like Italian?"

"Uh huh," he responded.

They entered the restaurant, and she immediately led him to the host table and said "Jessica Roland, party of 2."

The man looked through a list in front of him and responded, "Ah yes, I'll be able to seat you in just a moment, if you'll just wait to the side momentarily."

She nodded to him, and the two of them stepped to the side to wait. "Thanks for setting all of this up," he told her. "I really don't know where anything is in this city. I had to ask someone to direct me to the nearest department store that day just to find the place."

"It's no problem," she said to him. "I know what it's like to be in a place totally unfamiliar to you. It can be overwhelming. I'm just glad that whoever you asked directed you to our store."

"Me too," Harry replied honestly. Just then a waiter came up to them.

"Right this way, please," he directed them.

Harry waved for Jessica to precede him and followed behind her. He tried not to admire the view too much but couldn't resist a couple glances. They were led to a small table set for two against the wall. It wasn't so small as to feel cramped, but it wouldn't have sat any more than two people. "My name is Anthony, and I'll be your server this evening," he told them as he handed each of them a menu. "If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask." He left them with their menus, and Harry glanced up at his date and smiled softly before opening up his menu and looking through it.

There were many different kinds of pastas and steaks and other such meals listed. Harry knew what some of them meant as he had been forced to cook several of these, but he was unfamiliar with a lot of them. Thankfully, each one had a short description underneath it to explain what it was. In the end he selected something simple that he knew he would enjoy. He set his menu down and saw that Jessica was still looking through her own menu.

Seeing that he had placed his menu aside she asked, "So what's it gonna be for you?"

"Fettuccini Alfredo with Broccoli and Chicken," he told her.

“Mmmm, that sounds good. But I think I’m going to get the lasagna,” she replied. “Did you want to get an appetizer or a salad or anything?”

“Err—I hadn’t thought about that,” he responded with a sheepish grin. He opened his menu back up and looked through the list of appetizers. Half of it seemed entirely foreign to him, and he didn’t know what to make of it. He looked over the menu to find her watching him with a small grin on her lips. “Was there something that you wanted?” he asked her.

Her smile grew wider as she answered, “I was thinking some calamari might be nice.”

Not really knowing what he was agreeing to, Harry said, “Okay, that works for me.”

The waiter returned a minute later and asked, “Are we ready? Did you want an appetizer to start off?”

Harry glanced at Jessica and saw her give him a slight nod urging him to order it. “Umm, yes, we’d like to have some calamari please,” he told the waiter.

“An excellent choice. And were you both ready to order?”

Harry nodded and looked to Jessica to let her go first. She turned to the waiter. “I’ll have the lasagna.”

The waiter jotted down the order on a pad of paper and turned to Harry. “And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the Fettuccini Alfredo with Chicken and Broccoli please,” Harry replied.

“Excellent,” the waiter said as he jotted the order down. “I’ll have your appetizer out for you shortly. Now what can I get you both to drink?”

“I’m just going to stick with water,” Jessica told the waiter.

He turned to Harry waiting for his reply. “I think I’ll just stick with water for now as well,” he told the man. The waiter nodded and wandered off, presumably back to the kitchen to place their order.

“So Harry,” Jessica broke the silence a moment later, “what have you been up to since the last time I saw you?”

“Oh, well I’ve been jogging and working out in the mornings as usual,” he told her. A small smile graced her lips as she listened. “And I’ve been doing a little studying as well, since the school year is starting up soon.”

“You said you went to a school in Scotland, right?” she asked him.

“Yes, my parents both went there when they were kids. That’s where they met,” he answered her.

“That’s sweet. So they arranged for you to go there too?”

“Yeah, apparently they had that planned right from the start since they both died shortly after my first birthday,” Harry told her only slightly lying. After all, they had planned to send him to Hogwarts. They didn’t actually actively arrange for him to go there, but that was just a technicality.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “It must have been really hard growing up not knowing your mum and dad.”

“Yeah,” he answered. “My mum and my aunt were sisters, and I guess they didn’t get along very well. I don’t really know any details because she refuses to talk about my mum, so I can only assume they didn’t like each other. My aunt and uncle always kept me separate from their lives, doting on their own son. I’ve always kind of felt like an outsider there.” It was the truth, just a dumbed down version of it. It would have to do because he couldn’t tell her the whole truth.

“That’s terrible,” she gasped. “It must have been horrible growing up like that, feeling like you don’t really belong. You probably wondered what your life would have been like with your parents had they not died,” she said. “Oh! I can’t believe I just said that. How terribly thoughtless of me. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to bring all this up. Oh dear, I’m mucking this up royally, aren’t I?”

“It’s okay,” Harry told her with a slightly sad smile as he reached across the table and placed his hand atop hers. “You’re right. I did always imagine what life would have been like with my real parents, feeling like I really belonged in the world. But I’ve had 15 years to come to terms with all of it. Don’t feel bad about it, really. I’m okay talking about it.”

“I still feel just awful for bringing all that up,” she told him.

“Don’t. I really don’t mind talking about them. I mean, I don’t really remember them or anything, but I absolutely love hearing stories about them. And I’ve recently begun meeting with an old friend of theirs, so it’s been great to hear about their lives and what they were like.”

“That’s really nice,” she said. “I’m sure their friend is probably just as happy to share the stories with you as you are to hear them. Reliving old memories of dear friends is a great way to honor them.”

“I never really thought of it that way,” Harry said.

The waiter appeared at the table again serving the calamari. She gave his hand a quick squeeze before letting him pull away. Harry waited and let Jessica make the first move. She saw that he was waiting on her and gave him a smile for his efforts. She pushed a small pile of the squid onto her small plate and poured a bit of marinara sauce over it. He smiled at her and mimicked her actions. He skewered one of the breaded pieces and brought it into his mouth.

He chewed it curiously for a few moments before smiling and nodding to himself.

Jessica giggled softly and asked, "Is that your first time having calamari?"

"Uh huh," he replied shyly.

"I could tell," she told him. "Your reaction was cute."

Harry felt his face heat up and knew that his cheeks must be stained red. He mumbled a "Thanks," and forked another piece and put it into his mouth.

They ate their way through the calamari and waited only a moment before the waiter appeared to claim the empty dish. "Your meal will be ready shortly," he informed them. "I'll be back in a minute with it."

"Thanks," Harry told him sincerely.

He and Jessica chatted for a minute as they waited for their main dishes. Sure enough, the waiter was back carrying two plates. He placed the Lasagna before Jessica and the Fettuccini Alfredo in front of Harry. "Bon appetite," he said to them merrily.

"Thanks," they both replied. They grinned at each other for a moment before turning to their meals.

They talked a little as they ate, but they mostly just enjoyed their meal. Harry found that he rather enjoyed the restaurant's take on the dish. He didn't fancy himself to be a great chef or anything, but he thought that he made a decent meal on his own. But his dinner here was fantastic. He told Jessica as much.

"I'm glad you like it," she told him. "I wasn't sure what kind of food you liked, but I figured Italian was a pretty safe bet."

"It was a good choice," he told her earnestly.

Soon enough they were finishing up their meals. The waiter returned shortly thereafter and asked, "Any dessert for you or coffee."

Harry looked at Jessica. She shook her head slightly to show that she didn't want anything else, so Harry replied, "No, I think we're both pleasantly full."

"Very well, I will just leave this with you then," he said as he placed the check in the middle of the table but slightly towards Harry.

"Thank you," Harry told the man.

Harry took the check and looked at the price. 40 pounds, gratuity not included. Harry had never eaten out before, so he didn't know how much to leave for tip. He turned to his date and asked "Umm...I feel kind of stupid, but how much should I leave for a tip?"

She smiled at him warmly and said "Don't feel bad. 15 is about the standard."

"Thanks," Harry told her gratefully. He turned back to the check and did the math in his head. It took him a minute to do the work since it had been some time since he had taken a math course, but he eventually figured it out. 40 pounds for the meal and an even 6 pounds for the tip would do it. He had a 50 pound note from the goblins, so he took that out and gave it to the waiter saying, "Keep the change."

The man grinned at Harry for a moment before saying, "Thank you, sir," and disappearing.

Harry turned back toward his date who was grinning at him yet again, "You really are the biggest tipper I've ever met, you know that? If you're not careful, you'll end up giving all your money away."

Harry just smiled shyly and shrugged his shoulders. "Are you ready to go?" he asked her.

"Yes, I suppose so," she answered.

They walked through the restaurant and out onto the street again. Harry turned to Jessica unsure of what he was supposed to do now. "Err – thanks again for setting everything up. I really enjoyed the restaurant."

"Me too," she replied. "The company was especially nice."

Harry's face turned scarlet yet again as he responded, "I really enjoyed spending the evening with you too."

She smiled back at him warmly and the two stood there silently grinning at each other for a minute. "Umm, do you have your car nearby? Would you like me to walk you to it? Or do you live nearby?"

"I live a few blocks away," she told him with a brilliant smile. "And an escort would be lovely."

"Great," he replied. "Shall we?"

"Indeed," she responded.

She gestured to the right, and they set off down the street together. After a minute of walking silently, she reached her hand and placed her palm against his. He spread his fingers and intertwined them with hers. He glanced over at her and flashed a wide grin at the gesture. She returned his smile, and they continued to walk.

"I really had a great time tonight," he told her. "I haven't had fun like this in a while."

"Well you should do it more often," she told him. "I really enjoyed being out with you as well. Thanks for the dinner."

"Oh don't mention it," he replied shyly. "It was really my pleasure. It's not every day I get to eat a nice meal with a woman as beautiful and sweet as you," he said boldly.

She rewarded him with a slight blush and wide smile. "You're not too bad yourself, Harry."

They turned a corner and continued to walk and talk. "Listen, I know you're going back to school soon, and there's a good chance I won't see you again, so I just want to let you know that I really have enjoyed spending time with you. You're a really sweet guy, and any girl would be lucky to be with you."

Harry blushed spectacularly at the praise and moved to interrupt, but she continued. "I mean it. You're sweet and honest and cute. You're shy, but it only makes you seem even cuter. You have my number if you ever want to give me a call. It would be hard to start a relationship or anything like that when we hardly know each other and we'd be apart, so I don't think it would be smart to try. But I don't want you to feel like I'm rejecting you or anything. Maybe when you're finished with that school of yours, if you come back to London, you could look me up, and maybe we'll pick up where we left off tonight."

Harry smiled at her. "Thank you Jessica. I appreciate your honesty. You're right, of course. It probably wouldn't work between us right now. But I do like you and enjoyed spending time with you tonight. So maybe I'll hold onto your number and give you a call the next time I'm in town. If you're seeing someone by then, we can always just catch up as friends."

"I'd like that Harry," she told him somewhat shyly. "Well, this is me," she said gesturing toward the apartment complex in front of them. "Remember what I said, any girl would be lucky to have you," she told him as she leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She stepped up and hugged him briefly. He wrapped his arms around her to return the gesture.

"Good luck in University," he whispered in her ear.

"Thanks," she replied. "Good luck at your boarding school." She released him slightly and looked into his eyes for a moment, their faces only inches apart. She parted her lips slightly in anticipation, and Harry fought to keep his nerves in check. She closed her eyes and leaned slightly forward. He tilted his head slightly and met her halfway. He closed his own eyes as their lips met. It was a brief kiss,

but it was absolutely wonderful in Harry's mind. His only other experience kissing had been with a crying Cho underneath the mistletoe after a DA meeting last year. This was nothing like that. He rather enjoyed this kiss, but it was over all too soon.

She pulled away, then hugged him once more before backing away and saying, "Goodnight Harry."

"Goodnight Jessica," he replied and watched as she walked up the steps to the front door. She paused as she reached the door and turned back toward Harry. She smiled sadly at him and waved goodbye. He returned the sad smile and waved his own goodbye. She turned back to the building and entered it as she exited his life. He knew going into the date that whatever happened with her wouldn't last, but it didn't make it any easier to watch her go. He had fun with her. She was great. He just wished that she was a witch and went to Hogwarts so that they didn't have to part. But life is hardly ever that fair, and never so in the case of Harry's life.

He chose to walk around the city for a bit to clear his head. He didn't want to go back to Privet Drive just to be stuck in his bedroom for the rest of the night. He wandered the streets aimlessly for a time, not really registering his surroundings or paying any attention to where he was going. He was lost in his thoughts of Jessica and the date they'd just had. It was nice. He finally had a date that he could look back on and not find a complete disaster. After a while he finally pulled himself out of his reverie and apparated back to his bedroom at the Dursleys' house and spent the rest of his night reading.

That night Harry told Sirius about his date and everything that was said at the end. He also embarrassedly told him about the goodnight kiss.

"That's great, Harry," his godfather exclaimed. "Sounds like you found yourself a winner."

"Yeah," Harry replied. "It just sucks that it can't be more. I've got Hogwarts; she's got her own school. It would never work, and by the time it would work, she'll have already moved on, I'm sure."

“Maybe,” Sirius answered back, “but then again, maybe you’ll have moved on as well.”

“Maybe...” Harry said without much conviction.

“Listen Harry,” Sirius deadpanned. “You just had a great night with a pretty girl with no strings attached. Lighten up a bit, alright? Maybe you’ll end up with this chick, maybe not, but there’s no use dwelling on it right now. There’re plenty of girls at Hogwarts. Open your eyes and look around, and you might just find someone that catches your fancy.”

“I just wish my life could be easier for once and that something would just go my way,” Harry explained.

“I know you do Harry, but life is often too complicated for us to get exactly what we want,” Sirius lectured. “You just have to take what life hands you, and make the best out of it.”

“I’ll try,” Harry sighed.

“That’s all you can do.”

Chapter 5: What Once Was Home

The last week of summer passed by without incident. Harry continued to read and practice diligently. He finished writing the magical contract with all the spells attached with a day to spare, of which he was quite pleased. He was confident that no one of questionable loyalty would even be able to sign the contract. And those that did manage to sign would be bound pretty tightly. They definitely wouldn't be able to switch sides in the war without finding themselves seriously disabled magically. The penalty for talking about the club was much less severe, but anyone who breached that clause would regret the decision, and wouldn't be able to get away with it without his notice.

The day before he was set to leave, Harry packed up all the loose objects in his room, which wasn't very much at all. Most of his possessions were in his trunk already. He pulled all the normal things he would have for the school year in his old trunk. He decided that he would continue to use this trunk as normal so as not to arouse undue suspicion. His school robes, cauldron, course-related books, and a few personal effects went into this trunk. He kept the rest of his library, his invisibility cloak, marauder's map, and anything else that might be considered either unusual or particularly valuable in his new trunk.

He passed the rest of the day as he had passed every other day of the summer: reading and training. The next morning, Harry started his morning routine as normal. He went for his normal jog, and he said his goodbye to an invisible Tonks. He thanked her for watching out for him all summer. Despite the fact that he felt it wasn't necessary, he still appreciated the fact that she was there for him and ran with him every morning.

After he finished his workout, he showered and got dressed and ready for the day. He wore some of his casual khaki pants and a plain blue shirt that fit him a bit snugly. His hair was nice and long, reaching down to his shoulders. He put in his clear contacts and wore his new trainers. He also strapped one of the wand holsters onto his wrist and slipped his wand in place. They promptly disappeared from view. He didn't need his wand but wanted it on hand in case there was a need for him to perform magic. He didn't want anyone to know

he could do wandless magic, so he'd have to at least pretend to use his wand.

He read until 10:30 when he decided it was time to leave. He had no idea if the Order had plans of their own for getting him to the train station or not. He planned on just apparating there. If anyone asked him, he would just tell them that he left with his uncle that morning under his invisibility cloak. His uncle had not wanted anyone to see him.

He asked Hedwig if she'd rather go with him or fly to the school. He heard a brief reply of "Fly" in his head, so he nodded and saw her out the window. He added her cage into his trunk and apparated just outside of King's Cross station. He wandered through the crowd and across the platforms until he came to platform 9. He saw the barrier that separated platforms 9 and 10 and walked slowly towards it. As he walked right into the barrier, he found himself standing in platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, the scarlet engine that was the Hogwarts Express was ready and waiting for students to board.

The platform was not yet busy as there was still over 20 minutes left until the train was set to depart. He went into the train to find a compartment and chose the one at the end of the train that overlooked the platform. He loaded his trunk into the storage rack, sat down on one of the benches, and looked out of the window onto the platform. Families were gathering together, helping the smaller ones with their trunks. Mothers were doting over their children, most of whom were trying to escape their mothers' coddling and affection. If only they knew what life would be like without it, they might not fight their mothers so hard.

It became increasingly busy on the platform as the time ticked down. Finally, with little more than five minutes to spare, Harry caught a group of red heads rushing through the barrier. Ginny came through with her brother Bill. Ron followed soon after with a bushy haired girl next to him who appeared to be scolding him for something or another. 'Same old Ron and Hermione,' Harry thought to himself with a slight smirk. The twins followed soon after, with Mrs. Weasley bringing up the rear. By the time she came through, Ginny, Ron, and

Hermione had already started to drag their things towards the train with the rest lagging behind a bit.

Harry left the compartment and magically locked it up to prevent anyone else from claiming it. He walked out of the train to greet his surrogate family. He approached from behind Ron and Hermione. Ginny was facing them and was the first to notice his approach. Her jaw dropped at the sight of him, but she quickly composed herself and gave a nod as Harry held a finger up to his lips to signify that she shouldn't say anything. He silently sidled up right behind the bickering duo.

“Now you listen here, Ronald Weasley,” Hermione was reprimanding.

She didn't get to finish the thought though because Harry interrupted by clearing his throat and saying “Excuse me.”

Ron immediately shot back at him, “Excuse yourself, buddy. Can't you see we're talking here?” hardly sparing him a glance. Ginny giggled slightly but turned it into a cough somewhat successfully.

“Ron!” Hermione admonished before turning to Harry. “Don't mind him; he lacks all sense of manners and decency. Can I help you with something?”

“You can help me by giving me a hug hello, Hermione,” he answered with a grin. Her jaw dropped as she finally took a good look at him, her eyes flicking from the scar on his forehead to his eyes. Ginny burst out laughing at her friend's reaction despite the fact that it mirrored her own.

Ron, still clueless, turned toward his sister demanding, “What's so funny?” The action only served to reinforce her bout of hysterical laughter. He turned to Hermione next. “What the bloody hell are you staring at?” Ginny snorted loudly as Ron finally turned toward Harry. “And who the hell do you think you – Blimey!” Ginny doubled over with tears in her eyes struggling to breathe in between her fits of

laughter. The twins, who had walked over once Ginny started laughing, were wearing identical wicked grins.

“Harry, mate, quite an entrance you made,” Fred started.

“Yeah, only you could leave both men and women alike gawking at you like this,” George continued the thought, waving his hands at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

“And we just finished explaining to Ron how you don’t swing that way.”

“But apparently he just wasn’t listening.”

“It’s sad really.”

“How he desperately clings to that hope.”

“But we just don’t have the heart to burst his bubble.”

Harry chuckled at the twins’ antics while Ginny was clutching her stomach in her mirth. Hermione finally broke out of her stupor and squeaked “Harry,” as she threw her arms around her friend.

“Good to see you too, Hermione,” Harry said into her bushy hair. They separated after a moment, and Harry held his hand out to Ron. “Alright, mate?” he asked as they firmly shook hands. Ron only nodded in response as Harry turned his attention toward Ginny and waited expectantly. She stood there for a moment recovering from her hysterics before Harry held out his arms and asked, “Don’t I get a hug hello?”

Not needing any more encouragement, she responded by flinging herself into Harry, wrapping her arms around his neck. He responded to the action by wrapping his arms around her waist and spinning her around once to dispense her momentum without ending up on his backside. “Nice entrance, Potter,” she told him. “I haven’t laughed that hard all summer.”

“I live to please,” he murmured into her fiery red locks. As she pulled back Harry saw that her cheeks were lightly stained pink and chuckled lightly to himself. He turned to the twins and held out both hands to them as he greeted, “Fred, George.”

“Harry, mate.”

“Bloody brilliant.”

“Knocked ‘em dead.”

“You’ve got style.”

“and pizzazz.”

“We like it,” they said in unison.

“Couldn’t have asked for a better business partner.”

“Definitely worth every bit of that 10.”

Harry moved to argue with them, but the twins persisted. “We mean it, Harry.”

“We wouldn’t have a shop if not for you.”

Harry finally relented with a sigh and said, “Alright. So when is the grand opening, anyway?”

“September 15th.”

“Yep, only two weeks away.”

“We wanted to open up before school started.”

“But we just couldn’t manage it in time.”

“Our owl order business is still going though.”

“So you should be seeing our merchandise at Hoggly Hogwarts.”

“That’s great, guys,” Harry interrupted their diatribe. “You’ll have to keep me posted on how the opening goes.”

Just then Mrs. Weasley descended on Harry and engulfed him in one of her trademark hugs which he gladly returned. “Harry, dear, it’s so good to see you. You look good, still a little thin, but you’ve filled out a bit. You look a lot better than you usual do at this time of the year.”

He blushed slightly under her scrutiny. “Thanks, I’ve been taking care of myself this summer.”

“It shows, dear” she told him as she released him from her embrace. “And you’ve grown too. You’re nowhere near Ronald, but who is? I swear if that boy doesn’t stop growing we’ll have to enlarge the doorways just so he can walk through without having to stoop. But just look at this hair,” she continued, holding a lock of it in her hands. “You’re really in need of a trim, dear. If we had more time, I’d be more than happy to take care of that for you.”

The train let off a warning whistle to let the students know they had only another minute to get on board. They all said a quick goodbye, and the quartet set off onto the train. Hermione and Ron mentioned the Prefect meeting and told Harry and Ginny that they would meet up later. That left the two of them in the corridor by themselves. Harry turned to Ginny and said, “I’ve already claimed a compartment in the back. Would you like me to carry your trunk?”

Ginny smiled brightly at him. “Thanks, Harry. That would be great. Lead the way.”

Harry obliged and hefted Ginny’s trunk in front of him. It was heavy. He let a little magic slide into the trunk to lighten it up a bit, making it more manageable. He didn’t make it weightless, as that would have been a little too obvious. He just lightened it up enough to reduce the effort it took to carry. As Harry approached the door and opened it up

he heard one of the younger students mutter "How come it opened for him? We've been trying to get in there since we got here."

Harry turned around and informed him, "You've just got to have the magic touch."

As Harry bent down to lift her trunk into the overhead storage rack, Ginny moved to set her cat carrier down to give him a hand. "Here, let me help you with that." But he had already hefted the trunk up and was sliding it into the rack.

"You should've let me help you out with that," she admonished him gently. "You already carried it all the way to the compartment on your own while I was just carrying Em here. You didn't need to lift it up onto the rack all by yourself."

"Oh, how is Em? I missed her after I sent her off with you," Harry said, ignoring her comments as he stuck his hand into the carrier and scratched her behind the ears. He could hear her loud purring even that far away.

"She's wonderful, but I was wondering..." she trailed off as she pondered how to ask her question.

"Yes?" Harry prodded. "What is it?"

"Well, I was just wondering how you managed to get Em for me. I know she came from the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley because I saw her when we went to get our school supplies. But there's no way you could have gone there to get her for me, and there's no way you could have known that I had absolutely fallen in love with her the moment I laid my eyes on her." She said the last part softly to herself.

"I have my sources..." he explained evasively, "and an owl."

"You make it sound so mysterious," she said. She could tell he wasn't being entirely forthcoming with her but decided to let it go for now.

“This is kind of weird, don’t you think?” she asked him suddenly. “We’ve been talking so much over the summer through letters, but we’ve never really talked like this in person.”

“I guess so,” he agreed, “but we have plenty of time to get accustomed to it.”

She awarded the comment with a dazzling smile. “You’ve changed a lot since last year.”

“Well it’s like I was saying to you over the summer,” Harry explained, “you’ve got to live your life and really enjoy it; otherwise you won’t have anything worth fighting for. The minute we let Voldemort stop us from living, he wins.”

“Wise words,” she commented.

“Yes, well I’ve had a lot of life experience in my 16 years to give me an interesting perspective.”

“That’s the understatement of the century,” she laughed. “So are you excited to be going back?”

Harry thought a moment before replying “Yeah, I guess. I always used to think of Hogwarts as home, while the Dursleys’ was just a place I went to stay over the summer before I could go back home, but after the past couple years Hogwarts doesn’t feel quite so homey to me any more. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy to be getting out of the Dursleys’ house, but it’s just not the same as it used to be.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” she said sadly. “But just think, in another year you’ll be 17, and you’ll be coming here for the last time. After that you’ll be able to go out and make someplace your new home. You’ll get to choose who you live with and what you do with your life.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Soon enough my life will be mine to control. So you said you were going to regale me with the story of the attack on Diagon Alley,” he prodded.

“Oh, right, I did say that I would, didn’t I?” She chuckled softly. “Alright, well sit tight ‘cause you’re in for quite a story. So we went to Diagon Alley to buy our school supplies, like I already told you. Ron went with Mum to pick something out at Quality Quidditch Supplies, some books on strategy, I think. Anyway, Bill took me to the Magical Menagerie because I wanted to look at all the animals. I knew I wouldn’t get to buy one, but I wanted to look anyway.”

“I absolutely fell in love with this little bundle of fur,” she said as she pulled Em out of the carrier and into her lap where she proceeded to scratch her as she continued her story. “Anyway, Bill told me it was time to move on, so I put the kitten down, and we walked out of the store. Just as we were walking out, there was a whole bunch of ‘pops,’ and all of a sudden there are a good 20 Death Eaters standing in front of us.”

She took a big breath before continuing. “It took me a second to realize what was happening, and the spells were already coming at me as I went for my wand. The spells aimed at me were blocked...Bill must have put up a shield I guess. I don’t know, I never asked him about that. Anyway, they also shot spells at the building behind us, which sent us scrambling out of the way. I twisted my ankle in the process, but I was up and dueling with a couple Death Eaters for a minute. Then I was disarmed from behind. I never even realized anyone was behind me.”

She shivered slightly as she went on. “So one of them grabbed me from behind pinning my arms down and dragged me into an alleyway. I couldn’t see where we were going because I had my back to him. All of a sudden this jungle cat, must’ve been a panther or something, comes streaking through the alley. He leaps onto some boxes and up over our heads. Before I know what’s going on, the man holding me is slumped on the ground, unconscious, and a man, couldn’t have been much older than you or me, is binding them up.”

She smiled at the memory of her savior. “He told me that I was safe with him, grabbed me, and next thing I know we’re right outside the Burrow. He told me to run inside and wait for the rest, that he would

make sure they made it home safely. When I turned back to thank him he was gone.”

“That’s quite the story,” Harry said. He was grinning inwardly but was maintaining his outward composure. “You’re sure lucky this mystery man was there.”

“I know,” she told him. “I just wish I knew who he was. He didn’t give me his name, not even his first name or anything. But he knew who I was. He had long hair like yours, but it was a light brown. He had brown eyes, but the panther that came through had green eyes that seemed so familiar: similar to Em’s here and Hedwig’s owl friend and...you,” she said turning towards him.

“Really?” Harry asked somewhat uncomfortably. He had to stop his throat from gulping in his nervousness.

“Yeah, and now that I think about it, he was about your height and build as well, and apart from the color, his hair was exactly the same as yours as well,” she thought out loud, quickly making connections and jumping to conclusions. Her eyes began to light up, and she was about to speak when the compartment door swung open and Neville stuck his head in.

“There you guys are,” he said in a friendly tone. His eyes widened as he took a second glance at Harry, but he refrained from commenting. “Mind if we come sit with you?” he asked gesturing toward himself and the blonde girl next to him.

Harry quickly answered, “Sure, Neville. It’s great to see you, and you too Luna. How did your summers go?” He glanced over at Ginny, and she was looking at him intently clearly trying to impress upon him that their conversation was not over and would be concluded later.

Harry half smiled at her and slightly inclined his head to let her know that he understood.

They spent an hour or so chatting about their summers, Harry not really contributing much about his own summer except for his

morning workouts and meetings with Remus. Luna had not caught any of the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks she and her father had been searching for. They had apparently been hot on the trail when they ran into a colony of Fuzzwuffles which prevented them from following the path they were on. They weren't able to find any signs of the Snorkacks after that.

Neville had a new wand which he wasted no time in showing everyone in the compartment. It was cherry wood with unicorn hair as its core. He told some story about his Great Uncle Algie that Harry only vaguely paid attention to. It had something to do with his toad Trevor, but Harry wasn't entirely sure where he fit into it.

Ginny told them about her summer at the Burrow and about Ron being a prat. She explained to Neville and Luna about how she lied about seeing Dean Thomas and how her brother reacted as a result. Neville was very sympathetic, saying that he had no right to try to control her life like that, to which Harry added his agreement. Luna, on the other hand, merely said, "Oh that's just because Ronald knows that Dean's hair is infested with glumpees, which we all know are perfectly harmless for guys but can be quite hazardous for women." The other three occupants of the compartment exchanged looks and silently agreed not to comment on that statement.

After a time, Ron and Hermione emerged from their prefect duties bickering as always. They each talked briefly about their summers, and Neville, Luna, Ginny, and Harry each gave abbreviated versions of their previous descriptions. It was a peaceful and pleasant ride, although Harry became slightly uncomfortable whenever he caught Ginny looking at him wonderingly. They got some snacks off the food cart as the woman came by, and Harry shared his spoils with the others. He told them all that he had a gift for each of them that he'd give them when they got back to school.

Malfoy made his customary appearance in their compartment door with his two flunkies trailing slightly behind. "Well, well, well," he sneered from his position in the doorway. "What do we have here? Potty, two weasels, a mudblood, Loony, and a glorified squib. What a formidable bunch you are. The dark lord must be shaking in his boots."

“If he isn’t yet, he soon will be,” Harry replied calmly without even bothering to look at his adversary. “Now why don’t you be a good little boy and report back to daddy, or has Voldemort already done away with him for all his failures? You did know that he was in charge at the Department of Mysteries, don’t you? Your dork lord wasn’t too pleased about that. I can’t imagine what Voldemort did to dear old daddy after he failed to kidnap Ron and Ginny here.”

“Don’t talk about my father that way, Scarhead!” Malfoy shrieked. “He’s one of the Dark Lord’s most trusted followers.”

“I think you mean servant,” Harry interrupted tranquilly.

“Why you,” Malfoy cried as he reached for his wand. Harry held up his hand to the others in the compartment to stop them from doing the same. All listened except Ron. Malfoy’s wand was leveled at Harry as Ron had his trained on the blonde haired Slytherin. The two Slytherin brutes were just cracking their knuckles waiting to be given instruction.

“Put your wand down, Ron. I’m not worried about this Death Eater wannabe.” Ron looked unsure for a moment, then complied.

Malfoy smirked condescendingly and took his chance to strike. “Furnunculus!” he called, wand leveled at Harry. His spell rebounded off an invisible wall directly in front of him, and he was blown back a couple steps as boils sprung up on his face. Crabbe and Goyle scrambled to his side, unsure what else to do without being given direct orders.

Harry stood and strode to the door. “Do tell daddy I said hello, would you?” he asked as he shut the door on the faces of the three Slytherins. He smirked as he strode back to his seat and sat down. His friends were all staring at him in wonderment.

Ron finally broke the silence, “Bloody brilliant, mate! I didn’t even see you pull out your wand.”

Harry's grin grew wider. "Remember when I said I had a gift for each of you?" Seeing their nods he continued. "Well, this is what I was talking about," he explained as he took off his wand holster which instantly appeared before their very eyes. "It'll prevent your wand from being summoned while it's in the holder, and it'll turn invisible once it's strapped on, so no one will know it's even there."

"Wicked," Ron exclaimed. Apparently he was fine with presents so long as he wasn't the only one being given them, Harry mentally noted.

"That's really great, Harry," Hermione said, "but where did you manage to get them?"

"I owl ordered them from a place in Diagon Ally," he explained. This seemed to satisfy her as she just nodded and sat back against the bench. Ginny grinned at him knowingly, and he imperceptibly shook his head at her to try to get her to stop giving him those looks. She glanced around quickly and winked at him before adopting a neutral expression. Harry almost growled at her.

The rest of the train ride went by quickly. Soon enough Hermione was informing them all to put their robes on and dragging Ron out into the corridor to help organize the departure. The others grinned at each other knowingly regarding the bickering duo. "Do you think either of them will ever get a clue and just kiss the other one?" Harry asked the room at large.

Ginny giggled softly which reminded Harry slightly of Jessica's giggle. Neville just shook his head and said, "I don't know, Harry. But Merlin help us all if they don't figure it out soon."

"You said it," Ginny piped in.

Luna just gazed dreamily out the window seemingly oblivious to all that was going on around her. The train slowed down gradually and came to a stop after a minute. The four friends looked at each other briefly before filing out of the compartment. Harry led the way, followed by Ginny, Neville, and Luna bringing up the rear. As they

stepped outside, Harry heard the familiar and ever comforting call of, "Firs' years. Firs' years over 'ere."

Harry turned and quickly spotted his half giant friend who literally towered above the rest of the crowd. Harry held up a hand to Hagrid and called to him, "All right, Hagrid?"

Hagrid looked down through the crowd and spotted Harry. An enormous smile broke out on his face, and he called back, "All righ', 'Arry," as he waved a beefy arm at him.

Harry smiled widely and turned back toward his friends. They quickly made their way over to the carriages. Harry took a moment to study the two thestrals at the front of the carriage and walked over to them. He patted each one on the head and thanked them for taking them to the school before entering the carriage and taking a seat beside Ginny.

They waited for Ron and Hermione to catch up before taking off. Ron sat next to his sister, leaving Hermione to sit next to Luna. The carriage ride lasted for a few minutes in companionable silence. They pulled up to the front entrance to the castle and disembarked. As they walked through the Entrance Hall to the doors of the Great Hall, Professor McGonagall's voice permeated into their hearing. "Mr. Potter, a word please."

His five friends looked at him with varying degrees of sympathy. Harry smiled at them all and gestured for them to continue without him. "Save me a seat, would you? I'll be in in a minute." They nodded and continued without him as he strolled over to his Head of House who led him off through a side door.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster will announce the reformation of your club this evening as well as your status as Assistant Professor," she informed him. "He would like to meet with you after the feast to go over the details of the club. The password is Canary Cream."

Harry smiled widely at the name of the password. "His tastes are expanding," Harry commented offhandedly.

“Indeed,” she replied with the barest hint of a smirk. “You should be off to the feast, Mr. Potter. I have some First Years to attend to.” Harry nodded and walked over to the door. As he opened it up she stopped him. “Mr. Potter, I will be glad to see you back on the Quidditch pitch this year. Your broom has been placed in your room with the rest of your belongings.”

“Thank you, Professor,” he replied.

“I hope you were right about your friend, Mr. Weasley,” she said.

“Believe me, he knows much more about Quidditch than I do,” Harry explained.

“Believe it or not, Mr. Potter, I was already well aware of that. I chose you despite that, knowing that you would consult your friend and have him help you with the strategy if you were captain. I wanted you as captain because you’re a natural leader. You may not have been able to build the strategies, but you would have led them to victory. I hope Mr. Weasley will be able to get over his insecurities enough to lead the team.”

Harry was slightly dumbfounded at her explanation. “Thank you, Professor. I’ll be sure to help him along the way as best I can.”

“I have no doubt you will. Now hurry along,” she said with a genuine smile peeking through her stern composure.

Harry smiled in return and nodded, hurrying out the door and into the Great Hall. All eyes focused on him as he strolled through the hall to the Gryffindor table. He barely noticed the enchanted ceiling or the floating candles as he focused his attention on his destination. He saw that his friends had left him an open seat next to Ron and across from Ginny. Hermione was sitting across from Ron, and Neville was on the other side of Ron. As he walked towards the table, the hall was abuzz with whispered conversations, mostly stemming from the female populations. Girls from all years giggled and whispered back and forth to each other behind their hands. Harry caught a couple stray words being murmured, causing a faint blush to creep onto his

otherwise composed face. He finally made it into his seat and was immediately bombarded by Ron.

“What did McGonagall want?” he asked.

“Professor McGonagall, Ron,” Hermione corrected.

“Right,” he said. “What did she want?”

“Dumbledore wants me to meet him in his office after the feast,” Harry said with a grimace.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione quickly asked noticing the expression.

“Huh?” Harry asked thickly. “Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just not looking forward to going back to his office. The last time I was there I kind of destroyed half of it.”

Ron sputtered while Hermione looked like she might have a heart attack. Neville’s eyes bugged out, but Ginny just looked somewhat surprised but mostly amused. “You did what?” Hermione shrieked.

Harry glanced around as a few heads turned in there direction. “Keep it down, would you?”

Hermione didn’t even bother to look sheepish. “Why did you destroy the Headmaster’s office?”

“I had a very bad night,” Harry retorted darkly.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ron asked dumbly before catting on. “Oh...” A silence hung in the air.

“You know,” Hermione started, “you’ve never really talked to us about that night.”

“I know,” Harry said straightforwardly. “You saw fit to remind me several times over the summer.”

A look of hurt flashed across Hermione's face followed by one of indignation. "You can't go through this alone, Harry. You need to talk to us about what's going on."

"Not everybody deals with grief in a textbook manner, Hermione," Harry said pointedly referring to the "gift" she'd given him for his birthday.

"And some people don't deal with their grief at all," she shot back at him.

"And what would you know about it?" he asked her sharply.

"Nothing. That's the whole point, Harry. You haven't let any of us in. I know that more went on that night that you're not telling us. It's time to stop with the secrets and tell us what's going on."

"I think that's my decision to make," he told her coldly.

"I'm not going to drop this, Harry. I will find out what you're hiding from us," she told him matter-of-factly.

"I'm not some problem for you to solve, Hermione," Harry frigidly intoned.

Seeing that Hermione was not going to let it go, Ginny quickly asked, "So what do you think Dumbledore wants to talk to you about?"

Harry shot her a grateful smile and replied, "You'll find out soon enough. The sorting's starting." Sure enough Professor McGonagall was leading a group of small, timid looking First Years into the hall from a side door. They stood in front of the head table as Professor McGonagall strode forward placing a stool in the middle of the room. She set a worn, old hat on top of it. The hat sat motionless for a moment before it opened its mouth, for this hat had a mouth, and regaled them with a song explaining the difference between the four houses and stressing the need to unite together in the face of the coming trouble.

“Same thing as last year,” Ron commented offhandedly.

“That’s because we haven’t made any progress towards uniting the four houses. Now shush, the sorting is starting,” Hermione scolded.

Ron made a face, but Hermione’s attention was already directed toward the front of the hall. Harry glanced at Ginny, and the pair shared a smile and shook their heads at the two sitting next to them. The sorting went by with just the occasional rumble of Ron’s stomach followed by a, “Bloody hell, would they get on without it already. I’m hungry.” Or something of the sort, anyway. Hermione would automatically reprimand Ron and command him to pay attention.

Finally “Zeller, Erin” was sorted into Hufflepuff, concluding the sorting ceremony. The Headmaster stood from his seat in the middle of the head table and spread his arms out. “Welcome to yet another year at Hogwarts. There is a time for speeches, but that time is not now. Tuck in.” He sat down abruptly as food appeared on all the tables across the hall.

There was a small cry of approval at the appearance of the food, followed by a general murmur of conversation mixed with eating. Harry and his friends didn’t talk much as they ate through their meals.

At one point Hermione commented, “That must be the new DADA teacher,” gesturing toward the only unfamiliar professor at the head table.

“’ Ou d’ou reck’n ‘e ‘s?” Ron asked around a mouthful of food.

“Honestly, Ron. That’s disgusting. Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Hermione admonished. “Whoever he is, he can’t be as bad as Umbridge.”

“I’ll second that,” Harry inserted.

“Even Lockhart was better than her,” Ron commented, mouth free of food. He shifted his gaze to Hermione and said, “But then again, some of us were actually quite taken with him.”

Hermione blushed slightly, but answered, “That was years ago, Ron. We were only second years. Let it go.”

Ron looked like he was going to pursue his point, so Harry quickly interrupted. “As long as we’re allowed to use our wands in class, and we don’t get punished for telling the truth, I’ll be happy.” He unconsciously rubbed the back of his right hand where the words “I will not tell lies” could still be seen etched into his skin.

Ron and Hermione both shot him sympathetic looks, and they all resumed their meals. Soon enough, the food was disappearing, and Dumbledore was again rising from his seat at the head table. The noise died down quickly as the student body noticed the Headmaster rise.

“I trust you all enjoyed the feast. I have a number of announcements to make this evening. First, I would like you all to welcome the newest addition to our staff, Professor Caldwell,” he said, gesturing toward the wizard on his left side. Professor Caldwell stood and lifted a hand to acknowledge the polite applause ringing through the hall. He looked to be in his 50’s, with short brown hair with a light tint of gray running through it, about average height, and seemed to have a mild-mannered, modest countenance. He seemed...normal, which was quite abnormal for a DADA professor.

“Professor Caldwell will be taking over the DADA classes this year. The Educational Decrees that were passed by our previous DADA instructor have all been repealed.” A ring of applause met this proclamation. “We have another...unusual addition to our staff this year. We have taken on an Assistant Professor who will be leading additional classes in Defense. Please give a warm round of applause for Assistant Professor Harry Potter.”

Harry blushed brilliantly as the entire student body shifted their gaze onto him. There was a moment of absolute silence before someone

started clapping a few seats down from him at the Gryffindor table. Picking up their cue, the rest of the students, save for the majority of the Slytherin table, all joined in, clapping and cheering for him.

“Bloody hell, Harry!” Ron exclaimed next to him. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Language Ron,” Hermione scolded. “That’s amazing Harry. There’s only ever been one other student in the history of the school who has been made an Assistant Professor.”

“I know, Hermione,” Harry told her. “Dumbledore told me.”

“Did he tell you who the other student was?” she asked him. Harry shook his head no, so she continued. “It was Professor Dumbledore. He helped teach Transfiguration his 7th year.”

Harry didn’t know what to say in response. He didn’t end up having to respond, for Ginny finally chimed into the conversation with a “Congratulations Harry.”

Harry shot her a grateful smile and said, “Thanks, Gin.”

She gave him another one of those looks she had been giving him ever since Neville and Luna had walked into their compartment on the train, so Harry averted his attention and focused his gaze back on the Headmaster.

Dumbledore held out his arms again, and the noise died down. “Yes, Mr. Potter will be hosting a club this year which will provide extra defense lessons to all those 4th year and above who are interested. I will let him give you the details at a later time. Notices will be posted in your common rooms for those who wish to attend the informational meeting for the club.”

“Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has kindly asked me to remind you that magic is not to be performed in the corridors and that the rather extensive list of banned items can be found on his office door. The Forbidden Forest is still strictly that, forbidden. Our new students and

some of our older ones would do well to remember that. Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch team should give their names to their Heads of House. We are also in need of a new Quidditch commentator. Anybody interested should do likewise."

"As you all know by now, Lord Voldemort," a collective gasp went around the room at the name, "and his Death Eaters are once more at large and gaining in strength. I cannot stress enough the seriousness of the situation that lies before us. The castle's defenses have been strengthened over the summer, but we must all work diligently to ensure that the school remains secure. I urge you all to follow any restrictions or rules laid upon you by your teachers, however trying they might seem. We all place your safety as our number one concern."

Harry glanced at the Slytherin table during the Headmaster's speech. There were several students that were listening attentively, some looked bored but were at least paying attention, but there were a few, Malfoy included, who were completely disinterested and unconcerned with the subject at hand. Harry made a quick mental note of the members of this last category. Those were the ones they would need to watch out for.

"With all of that said," Dumbledore continued, "I think it is time that you all got to bed. Classes start tomorrow morning, after all." The Headmaster sat down in his seat as the student body began to rise from their own seats and amble to the double doors that would lead to the Entrance Hall.

Hermione immediately sprang into action, grabbing Ron with her. "Come on, Ron. We have to lead the First Years to Gryffindor Tower."

"Can't we just let the fifth year prefects take care of it," Ron grumbled as he followed behind her.

Ginny looked at Harry expectantly across the table as he continued to sit there. "I know, Gin. I can't talk right now though. Dumbledore wants me to meet him in his office. I promise we'll talk soon, ok?"

“Alright, Harry,” she responded. “Good luck.” She ran off to catch up with some of her fifth year dorm mates as Harry stood from the bench and casually made his way out of the Great Hall. He took his time as he walked to the gargoyles guarding the Headmaster’s office. He stopped just before entering the final hallway to pull out his trunk and extract the magical contract he had made, sure that the Headmaster would ask to see it. As he approached the gargoyle he muttered the password, causing the stone beast to spring aside. Harry stepped through the opening onto the spiral staircase that had appeared in front of him. He rode the staircase to the top and used the griffin door knockers to alert Dumbledore of his presence.

“Come in, Harry,” the Headmaster greeted from inside.

Harry pushed the door open and stepped into Dumbledore’s office. He was bombarded with flashbacks of his last visit to this particular office. His godfather had just died, and the Headmaster had chosen that moment to inform him of the prophecy that was now hanging over his head, the one that said he must either be murderer or be murdered. He had destroyed half of his office that night, but it seemed that everything had since been either repaired or replaced. There was no trace of his rampage left.

Harry closed the door behind him and walked further into the room. He noticed Fawkes, Dumbledore’s phoenix, sitting on his perch beside the Headmaster’s desk. He walked over to the red and gold feathered bird and greeted him with a “Hello, Fawkes” as he stroked the phoenix’s feathers. Fawkes rubbed his head into Harry’s hand and trilled his appreciation at the attention.

Dumbledore chuckled lightly and commented, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Fawkes so taken with anyone besides myself than he is with you.”

Harry looked at the man he had looked up to since the first time he had seen him and regarded him closely for a second before giving him a slight smile. “Thanks. How did you meet Fawkes, anyway?”

“That is a long story that will have to wait for another time,” the old man explained. “For now, why don’t we move onto the business at hand?”

“Very well,” Harry replied. “You wished to go over the details of the DA?”

“That’s correct,” he said to the young man. “Please, have a seat, Harry.” Harry complied by walking over to the plush armchair in front of the Headmaster’s desk. As soon as he was settled, Dumbledore continued. “I think the first order of business should be the magical contract that you wish to have your members sign. Given the nature of a magical contract, I think it important that I approve anything you have drawn up to make sure it is completely safe for the students to sign.”

“Of course,” he replied, handing over the parchment.

Dumbledore read through the parchment carefully, smiling slightly as he made his way through it. When he was finished reading, he held his wand over it and gave it a little bit of a wave. His eyebrows shot upward in surprise. “You’ve already performed all the enchantments?” he asked.

Harry felt a prickle on the edge of his mind that he quickly associated as another presence seeking to read through his conscious thoughts. He kept his memories of the summer, especially the ones involved in the creation of the contract, locked tightly in the trunks in his mind, knowing that the Headmaster was using a casual form of Legilimency to pick up any memories that might flash through his mind that would contradict his answer. “Yes,” Harry explained, “I planned everything over the summer and had it written out. I performed all the necessary spellwork on the train today.” He really hoped he had progressed far enough in Occlumency to keep the Headmaster from spotting his lie.

“You know you’re not really supposed to perform magic on the train, Harry,” the Headmaster said sternly. “But then, what the ministry doesn’t know won’t hurt it, will it?” he chuckled softly, eyes never losing their twinkle.

“No, sir,” Harry replied. “I’ve seen people using magic on the train before, and I’ve used magic on it before without getting in trouble, so I assumed it was alright.”

“Indeed. The train ride is a bit of a gray area, I suppose. But as long as no harm is done, we are willing to overlook any magic used during the train ride.” Harry nodded showing his understanding. “Now, Harry, what do you intend to teach at these meetings?”

Harry had to bite down the sigh of relief that he almost unconsciously made. “Well, sir, a lot of that is going to depend on how many people sign up for it, where they are all starting, and how quickly they learn. Assuming there are enough people for it, I plan on splitting the club into two different classes. The first class will consist of all the students I taught last year to start with, and we’ll start where I left off last year: Patronus Charms.

“After they have managed that, I plan to start a new line of training with them. Most of the practice we have had dueling in the past has been standing still trading shots with an opponent. I plan to change that. I’m going to introduce new aspects into the duel, not the least of which is movement. I’ll have them practice dodging spells without the aid of a wand for protection. I’ll just have them cast stinging hexes so as not to cause too much damage for that.

“Once they get the hang of moving about to avoid being hit, I’ll have them use that technique in a dueling situation. I’ll also teach them some new spells along the way, like more advanced shields like *contego* and *servo*, stronger stunners like *attonitus*, and binding spells like *incarcerous*. We’ll also get into dueling tactics and using your environment to your advantage. I’ll get them out of the habit of trading spells back and forth and into the habit of launching a barrage of spells at their opponents to catch them off guard.”

“It sounds like you have things pretty well in hand,” Dumbledore commended. “What about your second class?”

“They’ll start more or less where the other class started last year: the basics,” Harry explained. “I started them with expelliarmus last year, and they really needed the help even with that spell. Some of them were saying it wrong, and there were a lot of issues with aim and the force put behind the spell. Any students who appear to be ahead of the rest of the class, I will consider moving into the more advanced class. We’ll move through the basic spells: protego, stupefy, impedimenta, that kind of thing before moving into what the advanced class is starting with this year. The speed at which we move will be based entirely on how quickly they pick things up. I’m not trying to get through a specific set of material; I’m just trying to make sure they know what to do when the time comes where they need to fight back.”

“An admirable ambition,” the Headmaster praised. “It seems everything is in order, then. How often do you intend for the clubs to meet?”

“I thought maybe each one would meet once during the week for an hour, and once on the weekend for two hours,” Harry told him.

“Very well, that will work fine. I should inform you that you may from time to time be visited by various faculty members during your classes. I will inform them that they are all welcome to attend but that your authority is not to be challenged without due cause. If you feel any of the faculty are being disruptive to your classes, please inform me right away. Please do not try to take matters into your own hands.”

“Yes sir.”

“I will ask all staff to refrain from visiting you during your first week of teaching. That should give you ample time to get settled and get your classes started up without fear of interruption.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I should tell you, Harry, that another part of your Professor status allows you access to all of the House common rooms. I will ask you

not to visit any common rooms besides Gryffindor Tower's without due cause."

"Yes sir."

"You have more privileges and responsibilities than any other student in the school, Harry. And it will set you apart from the other students to an extent, but it would be best not to set yourself apart any more than is strictly necessary. You are still a student, and they are still your peers and friends."

"I'll do my best, sir," Harry replied solemnly.

"I have no doubt of that, Harry. You hardly give anything less," he responded warmly. "Now I imagine that you'd like to get back to your friends before they all head off to bed. If you ask Professor McGonagall tomorrow, she will show you to your office. I just have one more question before you go. What day would you like to have all those interested in the club meet and where?"

"Would Friday after dinner in the Great Hall be okay?" Harry asked.

"That would be perfect, Harry. Have a good night sleep tonight. You must be prepared for your classes tomorrow." Harry nodded and headed for the door when the Headmaster's voice stopped him. "Oh, and Harry?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"I don't believe I've yet thanked you for all that you've done with this club of yours. It is very apparent that you've put a lot of thought and effort into it. I'll look forward to seeing your results," he said with a genial smile.

"Thank you, sir. Goodnight."

"Goodnight Harry."

Harry left the Headmaster's office and descended the staircase at a leisurely pace. The meeting didn't go poorly by any means, but he wouldn't say it went great either. He still felt strained with the Headmaster. He couldn't trust the man, for one thing, and he had a feeling that if Dumbledore had any inkling that he was hiding something, the man would not rest until he found the whole truth. Harry knew he would have to hide his secrets carefully, which was all the more reason to practice Occlumency. He just hoped that if Snape agreed to teach him that the Potions Master didn't manage to uncover any of his secrets during their sessions. The whole thing was a big risk, but it was one he would need to take in order to learn the skills necessary to hide his secrets. Hopefully the steps he had taken over the summer would be enough to at least hide some of his memories from the greasy man.

When Harry finally made his way to the portrait of the fat lady, he realized that he didn't know the password. He remembered what the Headmaster said about having access to all common rooms and hoped that this meant he could get in without a password. He asked her, "Can you let me in, please?" as he approached.

She regarded him carefully for a minute before replying. "Very well, Professor Potter" she said with a wink and a smile. The portrait swung forward, and Harry climbed through the opening. The common room was mostly empty by now. There were a couple scattered groups of older kids, one of which was watching his entrance expectantly.

He walked over to where Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny were sitting and greeted them with a "Hey guys."

"So what's the big idea holding out on us?" Ron immediately asked, impatiently waving his arms in the air.

"I wanted it to be a surprise?" Harry half asked, half explained as he plopped down on the couch. At their exasperated looks he further explained, "I was just kind of embarrassed about it and didn't want to make a big deal out of it, alright?"

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Harry,” Hermione replied practically. “It’s a great honor. You’ll be in the next edition of Hogwarts: A History for sure. Plus just think of all the extra privileges and responsibilities you’ll have.”

“All the more to set me apart from everyone else,” Harry continued for her. “As if I wasn’t already abnormal enough; this is just another thing to set me apart from everyone else.”

“Oh, don’t be melodramatic, Harry,” Ginny chided him. “It’s not like you’re no longer going to be taking classes with the rest of us or anything like that. You’ll just be teaching one. It won’t be any different than last year with the DA. Besides, with all those extra privileges Hermione was talking about, it will be that much easier for you to get away with a little bit of rule breaking.”

Harry grinned at her unique brand of logic as Hermione’s head shot up and shrieked “Ginny! How could you say something like that? It’s bad enough with Ron trying to break every rule in the book. We don’t need you doing the same, and we definitely don’t need you encouraging Harry as well.”

“Oh lighten up, Hermione,” Ginny retorted. “Rules are more of just a guideline than anything else. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t broken your fair share of rules over the years.”

“Well I always had a good reason...”

“And who is it that gets to decide which reason is good enough and which isn’t?” Ginny interrupted.

“Well...”

“Exactly,” Ginny said. “Now lighten up on the rest of us on the rule front for just a little while, alright? We just got here.”

Hermione huffed, “Well, we should all get to bed. We’ve got classes tomorrow.” She looked at them all expectantly.

The rest of the group grumbled at her proclamation but nevertheless followed her direction. They murmured goodnights to each other. Ginny and Hermione walked up the stairs to the girls dormitories while Harry, Neville, and Ron walked up the boys' staircase to the sixth year boys' dormitory. They got ready for bed and said their goodnights to each other as each slipped into his own bed.

The next morning, Harry woke up two full hours before breakfast even began being served and quickly dressed in his workout outfit. Every time he got dressed in the morning he briefly thought of Jessica since she had been the one to help him pick out his entire new wardrobe. It always brought a bit of a sad smile to his face. Harry made his way through the deserted corridors of the castle without running into a single person. He walked out of the Entrance Hall onto the grounds into a sunny, warm summer day.

He decided to take a jog around the lake for today. He wasn't quite sure how it would measure up to the distances he had been running back in Little Whinging, but he figured it would do for today. As he set off on his jog, he found that he liked this setting much better than the suburban one he had been subjected to over the summer. A mist was rolling across the lake creating a beautiful effect. Birds were chirping in the trees. There were numerous trees and hedges and flowers and other growth along the path to give it an aesthetic appeal. He swung back around the other side of the lake and kept jogging and headed towards Hagrid's hut to see if the half-giant was awake yet.

As he approached he noticed that a light was on inside the hut. He smiled to himself and jogged right up to the door. He raised a hand and knocked loudly three times. A loud barking started up inside, and Hagrid called out, "Down Fang. Now 'oo'd be knockin' at this 'our?" The door banged open in front of him and the large form of Hagrid appeared with his hand around the collar of his boarhound, Fang. "Harry. Good mornin'. Didn' 'spect tah see yeh this early."

"I got used to waking up early over the summer. I went for a jog every morning, and I decided to continue that practice here. I just

finished a turn around the lake when I noticed a light on in your hut, so I thought I'd come pay you a visit," Harry explained.

"Migh'y nice of yeh, Harry. Good tah see yeh, as always. C'mon in and 'ave a cuppa."

"Thanks Hagrid." Harry walked into the room and took a seat at the table. Fang bounded over as soon as he was let loose and stuck his face in Harry's lap. Harry scratched the hound behind the ears as it slobbered all over his shorts. Hagrid set a large mug in front of him filled with tea and pushed some rock cakes onto the table. Harry gratefully took the cup of tea but avoided the rock cakes like the plague. He rather liked his teeth unchipped.

"So how was your summer, Hagrid?" Harry asked his friend as he sipped his tea.

"Oh i' was alrigh', s'pose. Did a li'l work fer the Order, bu' I shouldn' be talkin' abou' tha'"

"Of course," Harry replied. "Got any fun lessons planned for us?" Harry asked curiously, mostly because he wanted to know what he was getting into before he found himself knee deep in it. Hagrid's idea of a fun lesson usually involved creatures that could easily tear a human in two.

"I do, bu' I can' tell yeh abou' that. It'd ruin the surprise," Hagrid said with a hearty chuckle.

"Oh all right. And here I thought being friends with the teacher would get me an inside track on what was coming up next," Harry mock pouted.

Hagrid just chuckled all the more at Harry's lame attempt to get some sympathy. Harry sipped his tea some more then set the mug down. "Well, I ought to be going, Hagrid. I've got to finish up my workout routine, then get ready before breakfast. Thanks for the tea."

"Yer welcome, Harry. C'mon stop by anytime, now, hear?"

“Thanks Hagrid,” Harry smiled over his shoulder as he walked out the door. He jogged up to the castle and through the hallways and up the staircases to the seventh floor. He stopped outside the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy and paced back and forth in front of it three times thinking of his need to workout as he walked.

A door appeared across from the portrait, so Harry quickly strode over and threw it open. A muggle workout room opened before his eyes. There were weights, medicine balls, benches, mats, and bars galore. It was much more than he would ever need and more than he was expecting. Over the summer he had done most of his workouts with his own body: pushups, sit-ups, chin-ups, jumping rope. Now he had all these weights and a few machines to help him out.

Not wasting any time, Harry set off to work. After a while he started to wonder what the time was, so a clock appeared on one of the walls. He saw that it was about the time he would normally be waking up to start the day, so he finished up his current routine and left for Gryffindor Tower. He strode through the common room and up the stairs to the sixth year boys’ dormitory. His dorm mates were just starting to stir. Harry headed into their bathroom and showered. He got ready for the day as his friends all groggily got out of bed and began getting ready.

Harry was all set before any of his friends, so he went down to the common room to wait. There were a few people sitting around when he got there, most notably was the red haired girl sitting on one of the couches in front of the fireplace. She looked like she was still half asleep, though she was completely dressed and ready to go down to breakfast. Harry snuck up behind the couch and vaulted himself over the top to plunk down on the cushion next to the redhead.

Ginny jumped with a start at the unexpected movement next to her. She glanced over and saw Harry grinning widely at her. “Don’t do that to me,” she said exasperatedly. “It’s too early in the morning for people to be sneaking up on me. I’m liable to just hex first and ask questions later.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” Harry replied cheerfully.

“Why are you so chipper this morning?” she asked grumpily.

“I’ve been up for a couple hours already,” he told her. “I ran around the lake, had tea with Hagrid, and worked out in the room of requirement.”

Ginny glared at him for a minute. “I’m not a morning person,” she finally told him.

“I’m not usually one either,” Harry told her introspectively. “But I got into a routine over the summer, and running in the morning really helps to wake you up. It probably doesn’t hurt that I don’t have nightmares any more keeping me awake half the night and that my visions of Voldemort are few and far between.”

“You had nightmares? I mean besides the visions?” she asked, honest curiosity emblazoned across her face.

“Practically every night for a long time,” Harry deadpanned. “This summer started out especially terrible. But after a little while I managed to come to terms with things. I made peace with Sirius, and I adopted a new outlook on life. I started studying Occlumency on my own this summer too, and let me tell you, Snape didn’t teach me a thing. Imagine my surprise when I opened a book on the subject and found that there was so much more to it than “Clear your mind.” Anyway, I think that helped as well. It forced me to go through and sort all of my memories. I’m still not completely okay with everything, but it’s been enough to keep me going.”

“Wow,” she replied. “You really were busy this summer, weren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” he answered.

“Care to enlighten me?” she asked, perking up.

Harry smiled at her enthusiasm. "I can't tell you everything, at least not yet. But it would be nice to have someone I can talk to, and you're already onto some of my secrets," he added with a wink. He glanced over at the staircases and found Ron coming down. "We'll talk about that later though. There's your brother, but where is Hermione?"

"Oh she's probably already down in the Great Hall for breakfast making sure all the young'uns are eating a balanced meal to help them start the day."

Harry chuckled "You know, I wouldn't be at all surprised. Come on, let's grab Ron and head down," he said as he stood up and held out hand to help her up. She took it with a grateful smile, and they intercepted Ron who was halfway across the common room. "Come on Ron, let's get some breakfast."

Ron nodded and grumbled a bit but followed as Harry and Ginny walked out of the common room. When they arrived in the Great Hall, they found it half filled with students. Hermione, as expected, was already at the Gryffindor table, but she was not, at least at the moment, lecturing the First Years who were sitting at the end of the table closest to the exit.

"Morning 'Mione" Harry called as the trio approached the table.

Hermione looked up and smiled at her three friends. "Good morning Harry, Ron, Ginny. Grab some breakfast; you'll want to get a good meal in before classes start." Harry and Ginny shared a smile. "I wish Professor McGonagall would hand out the schedules already. I want to know what classes we're starting with today."

"Bloody hell, woman," Ron grouched. "You're not supposed to be so cheerful about going to classes. It's unnatural."

"Watch your language, Ron," Hermione admonished. "You're a prefect; you should be setting a good example for all the younger students."

Ron rolled his eyes, "Well at least there's one thing I can be cheerful about: no more potions with Snape...ever again." Ron smiled as he loaded up his plate.

"Professor Snape, Ron," Hermione corrected automatically.

"Cheers to you, mate," Harry replied glumly as he dumped some eggs onto his plate. "I wish I was that lucky."

"You had your chance," Ron reminded him in between bites, "but no, you just had to go and get an Outstanding on the OWL. I still don't know how you managed it. You're as bad at potions as I am."

"Well the subject is a whole lot easier without Snape breathing down your neck and Slytherins sabotaging half your potions," Harry retorted.

"Well Professor Snape can't berate your potions abilities this year," Hermione chimed in optimistically. "You got an O on your OWL fair and square. He'll have to admit that you know what you're doing."

Harry put his fork down and looked incredulously at his friend. "Hermione," Harry began as though he were talking to a small child, "what planet have you been on for the past five years? Do you think he cares how well I did or didn't do on my exam? The man hates me. He's hated me since before he even met me. Nothing will make him act civil with me. I guarantee you; this year will be no different than any others."

Hermione made to interrupt when Ron piped up, mouth full of food "Don' no' wh' 'oo e'en trie'n ma'e. 'S'no' wor't 'n my book."

Hermione's attention shifted to Ron as she set down her fork and pushed her plate away in disgust. "That's disgusting. I do wish you'd learn some manners, Ronald Weasley."

Ron took a drink from his goblet and retorted, "And I wish you'd stop bossing me around so much. You act like you're my mother or something."

“Well someone’s got to keep you in line when she’s not around,” Hermione huffed haughtily. Their argument was interrupted by Professor McGonagall as she handed out class schedules to all the students. Hermione’s attention was diverted to the slip of paper in her hands. She could be seen muttering to herself, trying to memorize her new schedule as quickly as possible.

Harry looked down at his own schedule and commented, “Well it’s McGonagall to start with double Transfiguration. I’ve got a break before lunch, then Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid afterwards. I tried to get him to tell me what we’d be studying this morning, but he wouldn’t give anything away.”

“You went to see Hagrid this morning?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, I stopped by after my jog because I saw the light on in his hut,” Harry responded.

“You went for a jog this morning?” Ron asked looking at him incredulously.

“Yeah, I jog every morning, started over the summer.”

“Well how are we supposed to know these things when you don’t tell us anything any more?” Ron asked with a scathing undertone.

“Well I’ve got Transfiguration this morning,” Hermione interrupted, “then History right before lunch. I’ve got a break after that and...”

“You’re not taking Hagrid’s class?” Harry cut in disbelievingly.

Hermione at least had the decency to look sheepish. “Well, I don’t really need it for any of the career paths I’m considering.”

“But Hagrid’s your friend,” Harry blurted out. “I don’t need his class for anything, but I took it because he’s my friend, and I want to help him.”

“Well of course he’s my friend too,” Hermione soothed, “but my schedule was already full enough without adding a class where I won’t learn anything useful.”

Harry glared at his bushy haired friend when Ron spoke up, “I’ve got Hagrid with you, mate.”

Harry smiled at Ron, but he was still upset that Hermione would just leave Hagrid behind like that just because his class didn’t fit into her career path. He didn’t have time to dwell on the topic, though, because they only had fifteen minutes to run upstairs to grab their books before the bell rung. As they were walking back to the 7th floor, Harry turned to Ginny. “So what do you have first, Gin?”

She made a face at him and said, “Double potions.”

“Ouch,” Harry replied with a grimace. “Well at least you’ll be getting it out of the way first thing. You won’t have to worry about a double dose of Snape for the rest of the week.”

“I didn’t think of it like that,” Ginny smiled. “Your new glass is half full attitude is a remarkable improvement over the doom and gloom one you were sporting last year.”

“Umm...thanks?” Harry replied uncertainly.

She laughed at his answer and clipped him on the shoulder with her fist. “Seriously, Harry. It is good to see you in such good spirits. I’m glad you were able to find peace with...everything.”

Harry gave her a genuine smile as they approached the portrait hole. Hermione spoke up as they came up to the fat lady. “Gryffindor Quidditch rules.”

Harry laughed out loud at the choice of passwords. “Let me guess, Ron picked that one out.”

“Right in one,” Ginny told him. “Wait. If you didn’t know the password, how did you get into the common room last night?”

“You forget, Ms. Weasley,” Harry replied formally, “that you are speaking to a professor. I have access to all the common rooms, no password necessary.”

“Pardon me, Professor Potter,” Ginny mock apologized, giving him a slight curtsy. “How silly of me, just a mere school girl, to forget I am in the presence of a soon to be legendary Hogwarts professor.”

Harry glared at her but the effect was ruined when his lips twitched upwards into a grin. “Shove off, Weasley,” he told her, giving her a playful shove. He ran up the boys’ dormitory to escape retaliation. He heard her call after him.

“I’ll get you for that, Potter!”

Harry, Hermione, and Ron walked through the corridors together to the first class of term. Ginny had gone off with some of her dorm mates to the dungeons for her potions lesson. As they entered the classroom, Hermione immediately steered the other two towards seats in the front row. She sat in between the two boys at the first desk a little off to the side of the middle of the classroom.

The rest of the class soon arrived followed by the entrance of Professor McGonagall. “Good morning, class,” she greeted sternly. “You are all here because you demonstrated yourselves to be exceedingly gifted in the art of Transfiguration. I expect all of you to work hard in this class to keep up your grades. If at any time I feel that any of you are not up to the standards of the class, you may be asked to either seek tutoring or to leave the class. These next two years will be difficult, and I will make sure that each and every one of you who remain in this class will be prepared for your NEWT exams at the end of next year. Are there any questions?”

She looked around the room for a moment to make sure she wasn’t missing any raised hands. “No? Good, then we shall begin today’s lesson. Please open your books to page 23 and read over the theory for conjuring inanimate objects. When you have finished going over the theory, you may begin by trying to conjure a thimble. Most of you

will find this spell extremely difficult, so do not become discouraged if you do not see immediate results.”

Harry opened up his book and skimmed through until he came to the section on wand movement and incantation. He read it over carefully and decided it sounded simple enough. He closed his book and slipped his wand out of his sleeve. Just as he was about to cast the spell, a voice interrupted him.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mr. Potter?” his stern Head of House demanded.

“I’m practicing the creo spell,” Harry explained.

“I highly doubt that you have finished reading over the theory in just five minutes,” she replied tersely.

“No, but I’ve already read through that. I just skimmed through to remind myself of all the details and of the proper wand movements. I think I’m ready to try the spell,” Harry responded confidently.

“I think it would be wise to do more than skim over the text, but if you insist that you are in fact ready, then we shall just have to find out for ourselves,” she reluctantly abated, looking at him expectantly.

By now the rest of the class had stopped reading their texts and were all watching the unfolding drama closely. Everyone in their year was used to Hermione being the first to try and succeed at each spell they worked on. To hear Harry Potter claim to have already read the theory behind the spell before class even started was unheard of. And to see him stand up to a teacher and make the bold claim that he was ready to perform the spell right away was all the more unexpected.

Harry took a moment to gather himself before setting his mind to the task at hand. He built up a small reservoir of magical energy within himself to prepare for the spell. He clutched his wand firmly in his hand before waving it in a clockwise circle before jabbing it forward slightly and muttering “Creo.” He felt the kickstart of magical energy in

his right hand. He cultivated it and merged it with the buildup he had already created, adapting the preexisting magic to match the new magic. He released the magic and a light briefly flickered at the end of his wand. On the desktop that he was pointing at, a small thimble suddenly materialized.

He heard a gasp to his side, and he looked over to see Hermione holding a hand to her mouth in shock. Ron looked dumbfounded. The rest of the class still had their eyes glued on Harry, their gazes occasionally flickering to either the thimble on the desk or the astonished professor at his side.

“Extraordinary, Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall exclaimed.. “I didn’t expect anyone to manage a successful conjuration until next class at the earliest. Take 20 points for Gryffindor. Now can you do it again?”

“Thanks,” Harry replied as he vanished the thimble. He quickly duplicated his earlier results, another thimble appearing on his desktop. By the end of the class, Professor McGonagall had him conjuring thimbles of all different colors and eventually conjuring a plain glass. The rest of the class barely started the actual spellwork, and only Hermione was able to manage to conjure up anything resembling a thimble.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Hermione asked the minute the bell rang.

“I told you that I had nothing to do but study all summer,” Harry shrugged. “Listen, I have to ask Professor McGonagall about something, so I’ll meet you guys later, ok?”

“Alright Harry,” Hermione said looking upset that she hadn’t got to ask all of the questions she had wanted to.

After all the students had left, Harry approached the Professor’s desk. “Professor McGonagall?”

She looked up from her papers and regarded him closely. "Yes, Mr. Potter? How may I help you?"

"Professor Dumbledore said last night to ask you to show me where my office was. I was wondering if you would have time sometime today to point it out to me."

"Certainly. I have a short break if you would like to go right now."

"That would be great," Harry replied, then added, "if it's not too much trouble. If you're busy or anything I can come back later."

"Nonsense Harry," she said with a thin smile. "It's the first day of classes, and I've only had one class so far. It's not like I have anything to grade yet."

Harry returned her smile. "You called me Harry," he commented.

"I suppose I did," she thought out loud as she rose from her seat. "Well, you are a professor, after all. I suppose it couldn't hurt to loosen the formality of our relationship outside the classroom."

Harry was shocked at her candid behavior. "I don't know what to say." He paused a moment. "Thank you."

"For what, Harry?" she asked as she led him out into the corridor.

"For not treating me like I'm just a little kid," he replied frankly.

She glanced at him as they continued their trek up some staircases. "I don't imagine you ever had much of a childhood, Harry. You have often displayed the maturity of one well above your years, but you have also fallen into the same downfalls that many others your age have succumbed to. As long as you continue to grow and act with maturity, I will treat you that way. But should you act like a child, I will treat you as one."

"That sounds fair," he stated honestly.

“Well, here we are,” she said gesturing toward a door on their right. They were in a corridor on the fifth floor. “The door will always open for you. You can set a password on it to open up when someone else uses that password, but I would advise you not to make a habit out of using this office to meet with your friends. We are giving it to you because you have extra responsibilities that the other students don’t have, and we thought you could use a space to yourself in order to help facilitate your extra role.”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome, Harry. And please, when we are in private, call me Minerva.”

“Yes ma’am, I mean Minerva. Merlin, and I thought it was going to be weird calling Remus by his first name.”

She actually chuckled lightly, “Well I imagine you’ll get used to it eventually. But I will still expect you to address me as Professor McGonagall in class and in front of other students, is that understood?”

“Perfectly,” he replied.

“Excellent,” she stated. “Well, I should be getting back to my classroom. You really did do an outstanding job in class today, Harry. I’ll expect this level of work from you from now on now that I know what you’re capable of.”

“You can count on it,” he said lightly.

“Indeed. Good day, Harry.”

“Good bye... Minerva.” That was definitely just weird. As she left him at the door, he finally opened it up all the way and took a good look at his office. There was a desk on his left-hand side facing the wall on his right with a high backed chair behind it. A small fireplace occupied the wall on his right. Two plush armchairs and a small sofa occupied the space between his desk and the fireplace. Two barren

book shelves adorned the wall on the far side of the room. It was a cozy office. Nothing grand, but it would be enough to suit his needs.

He sat in his chair behind the desk to get a feel for it. It was comfortable but kept him sitting upright. He would not be able to slouch in it for it was too rigid, making it ideal for getting work done. Harry moved from the desk to one of the armchairs in front of the now empty fireplace. These chairs, he found, were extremely comfortable. He stood and gave the sofa a sit. The cushions almost seemed to mold themselves to him, they were so comfortable. He reclined and waved a hand to summon his bag to himself. He pulled out the book on wards that he had started the previous day and spent the rest of the time before lunch reading.

Harry met his friends for lunch. Afterwards, he and Ron walked out onto the castle grounds and down to Hagrid's hut for their Care of Magical Creatures class. They only reviewed animals they had covered in the past, so the lesson didn't contain any excitement or near death experiences. Unsurprisingly, the class was relieved at the boring lesson. When the lesson was over, Ron and Harry walked back up to the castle together.

"Tell me why I'm still taking Divination again," Ron grumbled.

"Because your mum made you take 6 classes and Divination is much easier than History, especially since you've become so gifted at predicting your own death. Just think, now that I'm not in the class, you can predict my death as well. She'll probably give you extra credit," Harry joked.

Ron smiled. "You're right. Trelawney loves talking about your death. This will be so easy."

"Well I'm glad I could help. Have fun in class," he called out cheerfully.

"Prat."

"Git."

Harry watched as Ron walked toward the North Tower. Harry went up several flights of stairs to the Room of Requirement. He walked back and forth in front of Barnabas the Barmy thinking of a room where he could train and practice dueling. When he opened up the door, he found himself in a large room. There were some bookshelves lining parts of the walls, and set to one side of the room were several dummies. Before going any further, Harry turned around and locked the door, following it up with the best privacy and imperturbable charms he knew. He preferred that his training sessions remain private.

Curious, Harry went over to the dummies and took a good look at them. He wondered what they were for. As if in answer to his unasked question, and in fact it probably was, a small booklet appeared on a nearby table. Harry walked over and read the title "Training Dummies Instruction Manual." He browsed through it for a couple of minutes then shut the book and grinned widely. This was more than he had hoped for. It would be perfect.

The training dummies could be activated to move around and cast spells at you. You could limit the spells which they would cast by demonstrating which spells you wanted them to use. You could also set a difficulty level on each of them ranging from novice to dueling master. He activated two of the dummies to start with and demonstrated the stinging hex to them. He set them both to the level of a Hogwarts graduate thinking that would be a fair starting point for this activity.

With everything set up to his satisfaction, he called out "Training dummies begin." He immediately set in motion. He wasn't actually casting spells back at his opponents. This exercise was meant to increase his reflexes and reaction speed. He was simply dodging spells shot at him from his two opponents.

He found that as long as he could keep a fair amount of distance between himself and his opponents, dodging was fairly easy. But with two opponents, it was easy for them to close in on him, making things extra difficult for Harry. He was pleased to see that the dummies seemed to be able to work together somewhat cohesively to try to

trap him. He was hit numerous times throughout the training, but towards the end he was getting the hang of it. In the last few minutes, despite his fatigue, he didn't get hit once.

He stopped his training with an hour to spare before dinner began. Rather than head back to the dormitory to wash up and get changed, Harry merely thought about his need for a shower room. Lo and behold a moment later he was walking through a new doorway leading to some showers. He stripped down and entered. After he finished cleaning himself off, he waved his hand over his clothes to clean them.

With a half hour left until dinner was served, Harry headed over to Gryffindor Tower to see what his friends were up to. He entered the common room to find Ron and Neville playing a game of chess at one of the tables. Ron was winning as usual, but Neville wasn't doing half bad. He looked like he was giving Ron a lot more trouble than Harry usually did anyway. Harry greeted the two but did not sit with them. He instead chose an open sofa in front of the fireplace, which had a fire in it that strangely enough didn't seem to be giving off very much heat. He took the book on wards he had been reading back out of his bag and continued where he had left off.

Several pages into his reading, Harry felt the sofa cushion shift as a weight was added onto it. He looked over to see Ginny smiling at him. "Whatcha reading, Harry?" she asked brightly.

Harry held up the book so that she could read the cover. "Wards?" she asked simply, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Uh huh," was his succinct reply.

"Care to explain why you're reading about wards?" she prodded.

"I find them interesting. It's actually kind of surprising that they don't teach us at all about them here at Hogwarts. It would be extremely useful even just to know the most basic ones for life after Hogwarts," Harry explained.

“And since when have you taken such an interest in them? And in reading in general?” she returned.

“Since the summer,” Harry supplied concisely.

“Speaking of the summer,” Ginny steered, “when do I get to talk to you about some other interesting events that happened this summer that I have questions about?”

Harry looked around the room to make sure no one was listening in. “Not here, Gin. I promise you that we’ll talk soon, but please don’t bring anything like that up in public. No one, and I mean no one, has any idea about that, and I would very much like to keep it that way,” he whispered fervently.

Ginny adopted a contrite look. “Okay, Harry. I won’t bring it up any more, but can we talk soon, please?”

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked her.

“I’ve got nothing planned,” she responded.

“After dinner I’ll go to my office,” he explained. “It’s on the fifth floor in the corridor with the statue of Gregory the Smarmy where your brothers set off their swamp last year. You’ll need a password to get in. I’ll set it to...oh, I don’t know, ‘Mars Bars.’” Just say that at the door, and it should let you in. Be discrete about it though; make something up to tell your friends. I don’t want any one to even know that we’re meeting. I can’t have any of this getting out, ok?”

“Alright, Harry. No one will have any clue about it, I promise.”

Harry smiled at her as he inwardly laughed at his own choice of passwords. He couldn’t think of anything to name it, so he just went with his Headmaster’s method and chose his favorite candy bar. “Thanks. Now let’s grab your brother and Neville and head down to dinner. Any idea where Hermione is?”

“Let’s see,” Ginny thought out loud, “if I were Hermione where would I be on the first day of term? There’s a no-brainer: the library.”

Harry chuckled, knowing that she was probably right. He walked over to Ron and Neville. “We’re heading down for dinner if you’re interested.”

Ron glanced up from the board and muttered “Just gotta finish this game. We’ll meet you down there.” Neville didn’t look like he particularly agreed with Ron, but he didn’t speak up.

Harry shrugged and looked over at Ginny. “Shall we, Ms. Weasley?”

“Indeed, Professor Potter.”

The two walked out of the portrait hole and down to the library on the fourth floor. Hermione was occupying a table in the middle of the room with several open books strewn across it. As they approached Ginny commented, “You look like you’re already well into your NEWT studying. What gives?”

Hermione looked up exasperatedly and shrugged saying, “Nothing. I just want to make sure I don’t fall behind, that’s all.” She bent back down over the book directly in front of her and began devouring the text yet again.

Harry and Ginny shared a look over her head. Ginny shot him a questioning look, so Harry shook his head indicating that he didn’t have any idea what was up with their friend. Ginny looked at him pointedly then glanced at Hermione, so he took his cue to speak up. “Well why don’t you come down to dinner with us, Hermione? The books will still be here when you get back.”

Hermione looked up from her book yet again with an air of impatience. “I just want to finish this passage. How about I meet you guys down there?” Her face was back in the book before she even finished her sentence.

Another look passed between the two friends standing over Hermione, and they nodded to each other. Each one took a seat as Ginny said, "That's alright, Hermione. We're not in any rush, so we'll wait for you."

A sigh escaped from the bushy haired bookworm, but she didn't argue. After another minute she put the book down and glanced around. "I'll have to put all these books back before we leave or Madam Pince will have my head."

"I can help," Harry offered already moving to start collecting the various books. He noticed a trend as he picked up each one. They all had to do with Transfiguration or, more specifically, conjuring. Harry made a mental note of it but chose not to comment on the subject matter. After a couple minutes everything was in order and the trio headed down to the Great Hall.

When they arrived they found that Ron and Neville had beaten them down there. "What took you so long?" Ron asked bluntly.

"We had to drag Hermione away from the library," Ginny explained.

"Library?" Ron asked as if the very word offended him heinously. "What are you doing in the library on the first day of classes?"

"Unlike some people, Ronald," Hermione intoned brazenly, "I do not wait until the last minute to do my work. We're starting NEWT classes now, and if you don't work ahead you'll quickly fall behind."

Not wanting the situation to escalate, Harry quickly changed the subject. "So how did your chess game end?"

Ron's facial countenance shifted as he remembered the chess match he just won. "Well Neville put up a good fight, but I managed to trap his king with a knight and a bishop."

"Well Neville, if it makes you feel any better I don't think I've ever taken as many of Ron's pieces as you had when we left," Harry remarked.

“Thanks, Harry,” Neville said with a small smile. “I don’t know why we even bother playing him anymore.”

“To boost poor Ronnikin’s fragile self esteem,” Ginny supplied. Ron turned red but didn’t comment; instead, he just shoveled more food into his mouth.

The rest of the meal was passed with idle chatter. When everyone was finished eating the group stood up. “Well I’m going back to the library,” Hermione said as she scooped up her bag and hurried out of the hall.

Ron rolled his eyes as he watched her retreat. He turned to Harry. “Fancy a game of chess, mate?”

Harry laughed and shook his head. “Maybe later, Ron. Right now I need to set up my office and start working out some things for my class.” Harry left his friends and headed up to his office on the fifth floor. He didn’t know how long it would be until Ginny arrived, so after setting the password, he pulled out his book on wards and plopped down on the sofa in front of the fireplace.

About half an hour later, there was a soft knock on the door which opened as a female voice said “Mars Bars.” Harry looked up to see the fair skinned, red haired Ginny walk into his office hesitantly. She took an appraising glance around the office before claiming one of the armchairs opposite Harry. “Nice place you got here.”

“ Thanks,” he said then jokingly added “Go on, no need for formalities, make yourself at home.” She mock swatted at him from her chair but wasn’t nearly close enough to make contact. Harry waved his hand towards the door which shut and locked. He added some privacy wards he had read about to the room to ensure that none of their conversation would escape. He sighed as he asked, “So what do you want to know?”

“It was you, wasn’t it?” she deadpanned. She looked at Harry expectantly, waiting for him to confirm what she already knew in her heart to be true. He gazed intently into her eyes before nodding.

“Yeah,” he whispered with his eyes downcast. “It was me.”

He didn't notice as Ginny rose from her chair and walked over to him, so intent was his introspection; therefore, he was surprised when she all of a sudden had her arms wrapped around his neck from beside him on the sofa. “Thank you,” she whispered into his ear. As she released her arms from around him, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his cheek. Blushing slightly, she stood and slowly walked back to her seat. Harry's own blush diminished by the time she turned back towards him. “I wanted to thank you that day, but you were gone before I could,” she explained. “You saved my life, and I had no idea who you were.”

“I had to get back to make sure everyone else was ok,” he said.

“It's not your responsibility to ensure our safety, Harry.” He was moving to argue, but she hurriedly continued. “Regardless, I'm glad you were there. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here right now.” She sighed before adding, “That's the second time you've saved my life.”

“But it was my fault you were even in danger to begin with,” Harry burst out. “If I hadn't been friends with Ron, Malfoy might not have given you the diary. And you and Ron were targeted this summer to get to me.”

“You don't know that...” Ginny started to say.

“I do know it!” Harry raised his voice. “I was there; I heard him say it. You and Ron were to be taken alive back to him to lure me out.”

“You?” Ginny whispered introspectively. Suddenly she gasped and exclaimed, “You had a vision.” It was a statement, not a question. Harry nodded his head and kept his gaze locked onto the ground. “Oh Harry,” she gasped as she flung herself onto her knees in front of the sofa and took his face into her hands. “Look at me,” she ordered. He reluctantly obeyed. She noticed that his eyes sparkled with unshed tears, and her heart went out to him. “Listen to me. It was not your fault. We've all chosen our sides, and we have chosen to stand

by you, through the good and the bad. That's what families do; they stick together no matter what. And you're as much a part of the family as any of us and more so than Percy."

Harry shook his head fervently, or as much as he could with her hands still holding his cheeks. "Percy's your brother," he choked out. "He's your family, your blood, not me."

"Family is a lot more than blood, Harry, as you well know," she lectured. "The Dursleys are your blood, but they're not family. Percy may be our blood relative, but he abandoned his family, he lost the right. You, on the other hand, continue to put us in front of your own well being. I mean honestly, coming to Diagon Alley yourself? Why didn't you just tell Dumbledore and let him handle it?"

"I did tell Dumbledore," he explained. "When I had the vision I didn't know they were talking about you. They didn't actually say your names. Ron sent a letter with Pig to me the night before, and they intercepted the owl, but they let it deliver the letter so we wouldn't know where they got their information. I sent Hedwig out first thing in the morning, but she came back a little later carrying Pig. When I read the letter, I put two and two together and knew that it was you he was after."

"There was no time to spare, so I apparated to Hogsmeade with Hedwig and sent her to the Headmaster with my letter. Then I went to Diagon Alley and found you guys. A minute after I arrived, the Death Eaters came. I threw up a shield for you to block their initial barrage of spells, but they also shot at the building. Then I was busy taking out Death Eaters and wasn't able to get a clean shot at the one that snuck up on you. When I saw you being dragged off, I just reacted. Next thing I know I'm running after you. Then I just stunned the two Death Eaters there and took you home. By the time I got back, Dumbledore had arrived and was rounding up the Death Eaters, so I went back to the Dursleys."

"Thank you, Harry. I owe you my life, again," she said openly.

"No," Harry retorted. "You don't owe me anything."

“That’s not for you to decide.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything,” Harry snapped. “The last thing I need on my conscience is for you to jump in front of a curse for me or something stupid like that.”

“There are other ways to repay a debt,” she said passionately. Harry quirked an eyebrow at her. She took this as a good sign and continued. “You said that you’ve been keeping a lot of things to yourself, a lot of secrets, lately. Well, when things get to be too much or when you need someone to talk to who won’t judge you or push you to give more than you’re ready or willing to give, you come to me. I’ll listen, give advice when you need it, and I won’t ever push you for more or ever tell a soul what you’ve told me.”

There was silence for a couple minutes. Ginny finally released Harry’s face, but she remained on her knees in front of him, studying him carefully. He avoided her gaze for a moment, but then locked onto her eyes searchingly. He saw nothing but concern and honesty in the brown depths. She meant every word that she said. The only question was whether or not that was something he needed or even wanted.

As the silence continued, Ginny began to grow nervous under his scrutiny. She bit her lip gently but held his gaze ardently. After another minute he shifted his gaze to the fireplace which was still empty. He raised a hand, and a small fire sprung up from nowhere. Ginny took the moment to rise from the ground and took the seat next to Harry on the sofa.

As he stared into the crackling flames he started talking. “I found out how the ministry tracks underage magic. It’s through our wands. Each one has its own signature that they have on file along with the owner of the wand. That’s why no one ever gets in trouble for accidental magic because it’s done without the wand. Last summer, when the dementors attacked Dudley and me, I cast a wandless lumos spell because I had dropped my wand when my cousin punched me. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but I later learned that most adult

wizards would have trouble casting such a simple spell wandlessly. So I started practicing over the summer.

” It took some time to really get the hang of it, but once I did, it was easy. I never really noticed the feeling of my magic before. When you cast spells with a wand, it’s so impersonal. You don’t really feel the magic because the wand is focusing it for you. When you take away the wand, all that’s left is yourself. You can actually feel the magic coursing through you. It’s an amazing feeling. So anyway, I learned to do magic without a wand, which meant I could do magic over the summer without the ministry finding out.

“Those potions ingredients I asked you for at the start of summer were for the animagus potion. It knocks you out and gives you a vision of your animagus form. That’s where the black panther came in.”

“But Harry,” Ginny interrupted, “it takes people years to become animagi. How did you manage it in such a short amount of time? And without any instruction at that.”

“I had talked to Sirius about becoming an animagus, and he told me everything I needed to know. It turned out that the hardest part of the process was learning to control your magic in such a way that you could manage to transform without a wand. Since I was already practicing wandless magic at the time, it didn’t take me long to fully transform.

“So that’s how I was able to do so much this summer. I made a couple trips to Diagon Alley, got a lot of books to keep me occupied, and bought a few things for myself. Remus knows I’ve been practicing to become an animagus, but he doesn’t know I’ve made the full transformation yet, and he thinks I started the process last Christmas. He’s the only other person who even knows about it. And that’s all he knows. You’re the only one who knows about my wandless abilities.”

“Thank you for telling me,” she said solemnly. “I know that you don’t trust people easily, so it means a lot that you would confide in me. I

do have a question though. How did you learn how to apparate? I mean, you couldn't have gone to Diagon Alley if you hadn't already known how to apparate, so it's not like you could have bought a book to help you. So when and how did you learn?"

A panicked expression briefly crossed Harry's face at the question, so Ginny hurriedly amended herself. "You don't have to tell me if you're not ready to, Harry. I won't ever push you for more than you're willing to share. I meant that promise I made to you. I was just curious about it. But don't tell me anything you don't want me to know." She smiled as Harry visibly relaxed.

"Thanks," he said simply. He finally shifted his gaze from the fire and looked into Ginny's face. "It is kind of nice to have someone to share some of this with. Sometimes it feels like I have the entire weight of the world on my shoulders."

"I'm happy I can help, Harry," she told him earnestly. "Just remember that you don't always have to shoulder those burdens alone. There are a lot of people who care about you and would gladly help." She reached out and touched his arm as she finished.

"I know," he said softly. "There are just some things that I need to do on my own." If nothing else, the prophecy made sure of that. But even without the prophecy, he would never willingly put any of his friends in danger.

"Just because you need to do them on your own, doesn't mean you have to do them alone," Ginny commented wisely. "If nothing else you can count on me to be here for you whenever you need me for as long as you need me." She gave his arm a squeeze before drawing back.

Harry smiled a sad smile and stood up. "Thanks, Gin," he said as he held a hand out to her. She took the proffered hand and was hoisted to her feet. "Come on. I think that's enough for tonight. Let's head back up to the common room before people start to wonder where we are."

“Ok Harry,” she said. A mischievous glint appeared in her eyes as she asked “Am I allowed to walk down the hall with you? Or might that tip people off about our secret meeting?”

“Oh don’t be silly,” Harry replied with a straight face. “If anybody asks we can just say we were snogging in a broom cupboard.” He held the door open for her, his countenance never faltering.

She stared at him with her mouth hanging open for a second before regaining her composure. “In your dreams, Potter,” she retorted playfully.

“I wish. I’d kill for dreams like that.” Harry responded flirtatiously, throwing in a wink for good measure.

“I don’t know what to do with this new side of you. I mean, Harry Potter flirting shamelessly... what is the world coming to?”

Harry playfully pushed her in the shoulder, sending a cheeky grin her way. She returned the attack by dropping a shoulder into his side. They good-naturedly bantered back and forth all the way to the common room.

OoOoO

That night Ginny had a lot to think about as she laid in bed staring at the canopy. She had decided to call it an early night to collect her thoughts, so she was alone in the dormitory with Em cuddled up to her side, purring contentedly as Ginny stroked her black fur. A lot had happened the past couple of days. First there was Harry. Well it was really all about Harry, she amended herself. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing when he first walked over to them on the platform at King’s Cross. That was definitely not the Harry Potter that she had last seen a couple months earlier.

For one thing, he was wearing clothes that actually fit him, muggle clothes that fit him. He always had wizarding clothes that fit, but his muggle clothes were always ridiculously large and baggy. The difference was astounding. But it was more of what the fitting clothes

were showing off that really made the difference. This was not the scrawny boy that had first captured her heart four years earlier. This was Harry Potter, man, with muscles and all. And his hair... He had always had adorable hair that would never lie flat on his head. It was boyish and added to that innocent boy-next-door image he had. That image was long gone. The dark locks of hair framed his face, and for once he wasn't desperately trying to hide the scar on his forehead. His hair reached to about his shoulders, and it added to his new look wonderfully.

She just couldn't help the reaction that he had on her. Her heart skipped a beat, and her jaw dropped to the ground. If not for the scar on his forehead and his brilliant green eyes, she might not have recognized him. She looked into his eyes expecting to find sadness and emptiness in the emerald depths; instead she saw a mischievous glint there as he signaled for her to keep quiet. Definitely not the boy they had left a couple months back. That boy was depressed and moody and looked as if he was in the company of dementors. This man, Harry Potter, was full of life. The way he approached them and completely caught both Ron and Hermione off guard was priceless. She had told him she didn't think she'd laughed that hard all summer, but in reality, she wasn't sure she had ever laughed that hard. And with brothers like Fred and George around, that was saying something.

She hadn't been sure what to expect of him, really. They had been writing back and forth to each other all summer, of course. But they had never really spoken much in person. And she wasn't sure how he'd really be in person. He always sounded like he was doing well in his letters, but it's a lot easier to pass yourself off as fine in a letter than it is in person. Her fears appeared to be ungrounded as he seemed even better than normal.

When Ron and Hermione had finally come back to their senses and greeted him properly, she had paused, unsure of how to greet him. After all their letters she felt like she was being reunited with an old friend, but he wasn't really an old friend. The only time he'd ever hugged her was in the Chamber at the end of her first year. She wasn't sure if she should hug him or just say hi or shake his hand or what. But he had solved that for her.

When she threw his arms around his neck and took a breath of air as he held her close, she had gotten a flash of déjà vu, as though she had been in this position before. It was a feeling of familiarity. She shook off that feeling though. It was silly, really, to think that she had recently been in his arms. She hadn't seen him in months, and she hadn't gotten a hug from him in years.

When they finally got moving, he had offered to take her trunk. She felt bad for him as she accepted his help. The trunk was really heavy. She really didn't want to have to lug it around, and he was most definitely stronger than she was, so she didn't feel too bad about it. But he hadn't struggled with the trunk at all. And he had even managed to get it into the overhead compartment on his own. Last year Fred and George had teamed up to accomplish that feat. She was impressed, to say the least.

When they finally sat down in the compartment they had quickly fallen into conversation. She began to tell her story of Diagon Alley. As she started to tell him about her savior, something in her mind seemed to click. All of a sudden that feeling of déjà vu made sense to her. Harry was her savior. She didn't know how, but she was sure of it. He was the same height, same build, same hair except for the color. Different eye color, but the panther's eyes had been green and not just any green, but his green. Em' s eyes were similar to Harry's, but as she thought back to the panther, she could tell that those weren't just like Harry's; they matched Harry's exactly. That couldn't be a coincidence. He had probably just found a way to change his hair color and eye color. She wanted to kill Neville and Luna when they barged in and ended that conversation. She was sure that it had been Harry, but she wanted needed to hear it from him. She wouldn't be getting any answers until she got Harry alone, and she didn't know when she'd be able to manage that.

She had thought a lot about her mysterious savior in the few weeks it had been since the attack in Diagon Alley. A perfectly natural thing to wonder about, she would tell herself. He was quite handsome and strong, and he had saved her life. When he had held her in his arms, a feeling of safety had washed over her. It wasn't just a physical safety, but more the feeling of safety that only a loved one in whom

you had placed absolute trust could invoke. There were only three people who had ever made her feel like that before: her dad, her oldest brother Bill, and Harry.

She had felt invariably drawn to this mystery man and had not known what to make of it at the time. A part of her was glad that she felt a real spark for someone besides Harry. Even though she had dated Michael Corner last year, she had never felt herself drawn to him like she always had Harry. He was the first boy to show an interest in her as a woman, but she had never really felt strongly for him, and even when she was with him, Harry was never far from her thoughts.

It always made her wonder about her true feelings for Harry. Did she love him? Was it really possible to know that when she barely even knew him? She could never really tell why she felt the way she did about Harry. Sure she could give quite a list of his more redeeming qualities, but it didn't really explain the pull that she felt. She had been attracted to him the first time she laid eyes on him, the scrawny 11 year old at King's Cross station who didn't know how to get to platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. It was his eyes that did it. When she looked into his eyes, everything else had melted away.

When she felt that same pull toward this stranger, it had definitely given her some food for thought. It was like a breath of fresh air for her. She loved Harry dearly, in one way or another, but she had become sick of pining over him over the years. Yet she could never really shake her feelings for him no matter how hard she tried. To finally feel that same attraction for another man had given her hope that even if things never worked out with Harry, she could still be happy.

Then that boy had to go and muck it all up again. Of course she felt a pull to this stranger because he wasn't a stranger at all. He was Harry. She must have somehow known it was him on a subconscious level. How she knew this was beyond her, but it was the only explanation she could come up with.

The rest of the train ride went quickly enough. She noticed that Harry didn't talk much about his summer, but she was hardly surprised about that, given her suspicions plus what she knew of his muggle

relatives. The only real excitement had come in the form of Draco Malfoy's visit. She had been all set to jump in and remind him of what her bat-bogey hex felt like when Harry had help up his hand to stop them all from rising to his aid. When Malfoy's curse backfired on him, she was sure that he hadn't used his wand, and her suspicions were quickly becoming confirmed. She didn't buy his explanation about the disappearing wand and holster for one second. He hadn't used a wand at all.

As if Harry's change in appearance and apparent wandless abilities, not to mention the fact that he had saved her life, again, weren't all enough, there was the shock of the announcement that Harry was an assistant professor. It was funny, really, that Harry would accept the position, knowing it would put him in the spot light. He always tried to shy away and keep a low key, but everything he did and everyone around him just seemed to thrust him right back into the center of attention. So she wasn't surprised later that night when he started complaining that this was just going to set him apart from everyone else, one more thing to make him different, to draw attention to him. Of course she didn't hesitate to put him in his place for whining like that. The position also had its advantages, as he well knew, or he wouldn't have taken it in the first place.

Her thoughts drifted over to Ron and Hermione and their relationship with Harry. They were good friends, of course. But they were demanding and tended not to look at things from Harry's point of view. They seemed to think that Harry owed them something, that he was expected to share every detail of his life with them right away. And they seemed to bring about the worst in him at times, making him see the bad side of things. Other than being slightly embarrassed, he had seemed fine with his new position in the school until Ron and Hermione had started grilling him.

Those two had proved incapable of dealing with a moody Harry the year before. They just didn't seem to know when to back off or when to confront him. When he needed space, they would force the issue. And when he needed to be put in his place, they would tiptoe around him and pretend like nothing was wrong. When it came to getting information out of him, they pushed as hard as they could, but in

helping him deal with everything, they shied away, letting him shoulder his own burdens.

They would always be there for him when he was in a tight spot, but they didn't seem willing to lay down their own needs every once in awhile to help with his needs. It was sad, really, considering Harry's natural tendency to put everyone else in front of himself. He would give you the shirt off his own back if you needed it, but no one seemed to be willing to do the same for him. Granted he would never ask for help, but that didn't mean he didn't ever need it. And shouldn't his best friends be able to see that?

She could unmistakably see that there was some tension between the trio. There was, of course, the ever present friction between Ron and Hermione. But this was more than that. Hermione had obviously been upset that Harry hadn't been talking to her about Sirius. Not that Ginny could really blame him after hearing about that birthday gift she had sent him. Only Hermione would send someone an instructional book to help them through their grief.

The thing that annoyed Ginny most was the fact that despite the fact that Harry seemed okay with everything, Hermione seemed to be determined to drag him into depression so that she could pull him out of it. Harry had freely admitted to her that he had been utterly depressed, but he adopted a new outlook on life that helped him work through it. He had been meeting with Remus during the summer, which must have helped him through things. So why was Hermione so upset that he hadn't been talking to her? Shouldn't she just be happy that her friend seemed to be doing okay?

Ginny wasn't sure what it was that was causing Hermione to push the issue. Did she want to be the one to help him? Or was it just her need to know everything about everything that was driving her? Hermione was a brilliant witch by any standards, but what she had in intelligence she often lacked in social skills. It was not that she was socially inept. Hermione was very good at reading people and interpreting their actions, but she often let her intellectual pursuits override everything else. She was like a reporter in that respect. When she smelled a story, she wouldn't stop digging until she had all the details, regardless of who might get hurt in the process. Ginny

decided that she would keep an eye out on it. She wouldn't let Hermione drag Harry down into the dumps if she could help it.

Then there had been their conversation that night. All her suspicions had been confirmed. Harry had saved her life at Diagon Alley. He was an animagus, a panther, and he was rather proficient with wandless magic. Even though she had been expecting all of that, it still shocked her deep down. How could she not be shocked? It's not every day you meet a man capable of casting wandless spells with ease, who learned to be an animagus and to apparate in the span of one summer.

In his office, she had seen the Harry that she really knew, the one with the weight of the world on his shoulders. She wondered how much of the Harry that he presented to the world was real and how much was just a mask. He seemed to be okay. She was usually pretty good at reading people, and she didn't think that his new happy, somewhat carefree attitude was fake; it was just another part of him to go along with the tortured soul. Even without the new attitude he wasn't as moody as he had been the year before, but she could clearly see that he had quite a load on his shoulders. But she could also see how determined he was to bear it. It was in his eyes. All she had to do was look into those emerald orbs, and she knew that he could take on the whole world if need be. And he probably would too.

She knew he had barely told her anything. That was plain for anyone to see, especially by the panicked look on his face when she had asked how he learned to apparate. She knew exactly why he looked panicked at the question too. He had expected her to push and push for answers and force it out of him. She knew why he expected this too: Ron and Hermione. Well, mostly Hermione, if she was completely honest. Hermione had said it all at the feast the day before: "I'm not going to drop this, Harry. I will find out what you're hiding from us." Yep, that would do it.

She hoped that he would come to trust her with more and more of his secrets as time went by, but she wouldn't force him to. That's not what he needed right now. He just needed support, someone in his corner to let him know that he's doing alright and to encourage him to keep going, someone who didn't expect anything in return. Most

people had that in their families, but Harry didn't. He needed that quiet support from somewhere, and since none of his other friends seemed to be willing to put him in front of themselves, she'd have to be the one to do it. Not that she minded, really.

According to Harry she already knew more than anyone else. She found it hard to believe that he would hide all of his abilities even from Dumbledore and Remus, but she knew it wasn't her place to question him. She was sure he had his own reasons for doing so. Maybe he'd tell her one day, maybe he wouldn't. He really was a complicated guy, but that really just meant he was all the more interesting. She could tell that he had done a lot of maturing over the last year and especially over the summer. She decided one thing was certain as the drowsiness started to settle in on her: this was going to be one interesting year.

OoOoO

The next day Harry and company had DADA first thing in the morning. They were all eager to find out what their new professor was like. Having had some rather interesting experiences with DADA professors in the past, they were weary and didn't know what to expect of this mysterious man. So they were rather surprised when he seemed perfectly normal...almost too normal.

The class had consisted of some theory followed by practical application, much like one of Professor McGonagall's or Flitwick's classes would be like. He had not seemed overly strict like the Gryffindor Head of House, but he hadn't been as excitable as Flitwick either. He wasn't surly like Snape, nor was he flakey like Trelawney. He didn't really have any defining characteristics that stuck out to Harry from the one class. His friends agreed with this assessment, but they were not especially comforted by his normalcy; instead, they found themselves skeptical. Normal could easily mean that he had some big secret that he was trying desperately to keep quiet. It would be just their luck.

Ron separated from Harry and Hermione as they headed down to the dungeons. Ron had not pulled off the O he needed on his Potion OWL to get into Snape's class, not that he seemed terribly bothered

by it. Sure he had been thinking of becoming an auror after Hogwarts, but he couldn't complain at the lack of classes with Snape. Harry was outwardly frowning at the prospect of two more years of Snape, but he gained some satisfaction from the fact that he was doing it for more than the Potions NEWT. If only Snape knew he would be playing right into Harry's hands by continually taunting and berating him. It made Harry want to laugh, but he reined that emotion in. He needed to remain stoic and aloof for this to work.

As they approached the door to the classroom, they found a queue of students already waiting around. On one side of the hallway were Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott of Hufflepuff and Terry Boot, Lisa Turpin, and Padma Patil of Ravenclaw. On the other side stood the Slytherins: Draco Malfoy, ever present bodyguards absent, Pansy Parkinson, disgustingly fawning over Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Blaise Zabini, and Tracey Davis. It figured that the Slytherins would be the most heavily represented group. Snape was the only professor who obviously favored students in his own house.

As Harry and Hermione strode over to the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, Draco Malfoy stepped away from the wall, sneer in place. "Well, well," he drawled, "it appears fame is everything. What did you have to do to get into this class Potter? Sign a few autographs to the right people?"

"Nah, just aced my owl," Harry replied in a cheerful tone. He turned back to his friends only to be interrupted by the blonde haired Slytherin again.

"Not wise, Potter, turning your back on an enemy," the boy cautioned.

Harry laughed heartily as he turned to face Draco. "Enemy?" he choked between peals of laughter. "Voldemort is an enemy, Malfoy. You're just an annoyance: a fly buzzing around my head. Just be careful you don't get squashed." He turned back to his friends who were all laughing now.

Harry had already cast a shield on his back, but it proved to be unnecessary. Snape strolled down the corridor effectively halting Malfoy from doing whatever it was he had planned on doing. And Harry was sure that Malfoy had been planning something. The Potions Master didn't say a word as he threw open the doors to the classroom and swept inside, black robes billowing behind him. The class followed in reluctantly after him. The Slytherins upset at Harry's words and their inability to gain retribution while the rest were upset at the mere prospect of having a class with Snape.

"You know you really shouldn't egg him on like that," Hermione warned in his ear as they shuffled to one of the desks. "He may be just a spoiled little brat, but you don't know what he might be capable of."

"Relax, Hermione," Harry reassured his friend. "Malfoy's bark is much worse than his bite. If he somehow managed to catch me off guard, he doesn't have the ability to do any lasting harm."

Hermione didn't seem pleased by his answer, but Harry was saved from further lecture by Snape's icy voice. "Most of you are here because you have proved to be exceptional in the subtle art of potion making," he began. "Others here have never shown such an aptitude," his gaze locked onto Harry, "and I find myself wondering how you managed to make it into this class." He paused dramatically, as if waiting for Harry to answer the question that was so obviously directed at him.

After a moment he continued. "Nevertheless, those who managed to get into this class by any means other than skill will soon find themselves out the door as I will not tolerate incompetence in this class. If you are unable to keep up with the workload, I will not hesitate to drop you from the class."

"Now, the instructions are on the board." They appeared as he waved his wand behind him. "I expect you all to work alone and in silence." He turned and swept through the door leading to his office. The students all set in motion, setting up their cauldrons and preparing the potions. Harry followed the directions meticulously. He

finished the potion shortly after Hermione. When he bottled it up and rose from his seat, he muttered to Hermione "Don't clear my cauldron just yet."

She shot him an apologetic look, remembering the time last year when Snape had smashed his bottle of potion after he had turned it in. Hermione had already cleared his cauldron for him, so he had nothing left to turn in. He had received a zero that day. The Potions Master glared as Harry handed the bottle over, but he did not drop it this time. As Harry turned to head back to his seat, the bell rang signifying the end of class. The students all began to pack up their things. Harry deliberately took his time. He noticed Hermione watching him closely, waiting for him to finish up so they could leave.

He whispered to her, "I've got to talk to him about something. I'll catch up with you later." She gave him an inquiring glance but nodded her acceptance and left the dungeon. The rest of the class was shuffling out of the classroom. Snape glared malevolently at Harry as the rest of the students left.

"Class time is over, Potter," he sneered. "I suggest you run back up to Gryffindor Tower before your fan club begins to think something happened to you."

"Actually, Professor Snape," Harry returned collectedly. "I was wondering if I might have a word with you." The Professor's face tightened, but he did not respond. "I wanted to thank you for the extra potions lessons you gave me last term," Harry said meaningfully. "I was wondering if you would consider continuing where we left off."

"As I remember, Potter," Snape spat, "you never took a single one of my lessons seriously, never put forth an ounce of effort into the subject. And your lack of progress led to that little fiasco at the end of the year. Not only that, you infringed on my privacy."

"I am sorry for that, sir," Harry responded coolly. "I let my curiosity get the better of me and did not think my decision through. I promise to never let anything like that happen again. Last year I was not inclined to take the extra lessons as seriously as I should have

because no one saw fit to explain why they were necessary. I learned my lesson the hard way, and I'd like to make sure that nothing like that happens again."

Snape glared at him for a full minute before he spoke again, his tone tangibly frigid. "The last thing I need in my life is extra time with you, Potter. Why not ask the Headmaster for lessons. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to cater to your every whim."

"Professor Dumbledore seems to only want to treat me like a child, to lock me away where I'll be safe and protected. He wouldn't push me the way you would. You won't hold any punches. That's what I need if I want to be able to fight against Vol – You-Know-Who."

Surprise briefly flickered across the normally emotionless mask of the Potions Master. He recovered quickly enough and narrowed his eyes at the Gryffindor. "Thursday nights, 6:00, beginning next week. If you are late, if you don't put forth the effort, if you so much as breathe the wrong way, the lessons end. And if I ever catch you snooping into my personal affairs again," he paused as a huff escaped his nostrils. Harry briefly imagined that had he been a dragon, a plume of flame would have escaped with the rush of air. "I will make you wish you'd never been born."

Harry held back his smile knowing it would only infuriate the man, and Harry didn't want to push his luck just yet. "Thank you, sir," he said evenly. He turned on his heel and marched out the door. He smiled to himself as he walked up the staircases to the main level of the castle. He had about an hour to kill before lunch, so he decided to retire to his office for a bit of reading. By the time he left for lunch, Harry had finished the book on wards that he had been avidly reading the past couple days. He had started up a book on basic healing spells to polish off the rest of the time to lunch, but he resolved to visit the library at some point to see what books it had to offer on the subject. He found himself genuinely interested in learning as much as he could about wards.

He didn't get very far into the healing book, but he had made it a point to find books on that subject as well. With his luck, it was only a

matter of time before he found himself in a scrape. Having some knowledge of healing spells could prove to be vital. Once he finished his current book, that would be another thing to look into in the library.

At lunch, most of the talk centered on the reformation of the DA. Fliers had appeared in the House common rooms, so everyone was naturally curious about what this informational meeting would be about on Friday, none more so than Harry's best friends. But Harry answered their questions with the same response he gave everyone else "Just wait 'til Friday." He added in "You don't want to ruin the surprise, do you?"

Hermione had taken to pestering him about the magical contract he had written for the club. Since he had asked her about it over the summer, she had been naturally curious about what he had come up with and why he hadn't further pursued her help. Harry just told her, "I've already written it up and showed it to Dumbledore. He seemed to think it was just fine." She was not happy with his lack of information, but she could do nothing more than huff her displeasure.

After lunch Ron and Hermione walked out the Entrance Hall onto the grounds toward the greenhouses for Herbology. Harry headed to the seventh floor to the Room of Requirement. He would take advantage of his friends' absence by training without raising any suspicion. One of the harder things about this year was going to be keeping all his extra training secret from his friends. They were bound to get curious if he constantly disappeared for hours at a time.

But while they were off in class, they wouldn't be able to keep tabs on him. He had two hours until Charms class. He split up his training for the day into two sessions. The first session played out much like it had the day before. He activated two dummies on Hogwarts graduate skill level, shooting stinging spells only. He spent 45 minutes simply dodging spells without the aid of magic. He was pleased that he had definitely been hit less than the previous day.

He stopped the dummies and reprogrammed them. He set them each to the level of an auror in training, with many spells at their disposal. He didn't want to be stunned and left unconscious, so he avoided letting them use any spells that could cause him to become

incapacitated, but that still left them with many spells to work with. Harry wasn't going to be just dodging this time around. Now was the time to practice fighting back.

For 30 minutes he dueled the two dummies, who were markably improved over the Hogwarts graduates Harry had been used to dodging, but not a problem for Harry who now had magic at his disposal. With his ability to cast two spells at the same time, he had yet to be hit with a single spell after the first half an hour, and he had repeatedly knocked both opponents off their feet. He decided to spend the rest of his time without shield spells to aid him in his defense. After all, Death Eaters often used spells that couldn't be blocked by conventional shield spells.

Even with the lack of shield spells, Harry found himself only getting hit a couple times in the last half hour of his training. He had his legs tripped up in a leg locker curse, but he had quickly counteracted the curse before either dummy could take advantage of his weakened state. That was the only time he been remotely close to being overwhelmed. He had also been hit with a stinging hex and a couple other simple hexes, but that wasn't enough to distract him from the fight.

By the time he was finished he was sweating profusely and had only 15 minutes to get cleaned up and down to the charms classroom. The shower room appeared as he thought of his need for it, so he quickly washed himself and got ready for class. He made it to class with nary a moment to spare.

The rest of the week passed by quickly enough, filled with classes, training, reading, and the occasional game of chess or exploding snap with his friends. He even flew around on his Firebolt a couple times, just for the thrill of it. It had been so long since he had been up in the air on his broomstick. It was an invigorating feeling. Ron had booked the Quidditch pitch for tryouts that Saturday before lunch. Harry was excited to get the season started. It had been too long since he'd played the game.

Friday rolled around quickly enough, and Harry found himself starting to get nervous. Despite the various locks he had placed in his mind to

help him not only hide his memories but also better control his emotions, he could still feel the butterflies creeping into his stomach. That night he was starting something big, and he didn't know if he was ready for it. He had no doubt that he had plenty to teach. It was more the matter of leading and speaking in front of everybody, being an authority figure, that had Harry reeling.

He had never liked being in the spotlight. It had been forced on him upon his reintroduction to the wizarding world for something he couldn't remember doing and that he played little part in. Voldemort had tried to kill him, and the curse rebounded due to his mother's love for him. How that justified his fame, Harry was not sure, but there was no arguing with people about it. They were set in their views.

This time around Harry was stepping into the spotlight of his own accord. He was setting himself apart from all of his peers. It was for a worthy cause and not just for the thrill of being the center of attention. Harry would never do anything just for the attention. He preferred not to have any attention given to him, but this was too important to let that get in his way. This was something proactive he could do in the war against Voldemort, something that could save lives.

He had no delusions of building an army to strike and subdue the Dark Lord, but he could teach these kids to fight. If that meant just one of them survived an encounter with a Death Eater, all the effort would be worth it. But he knew that many of his schoolmates wouldn't be satisfied sitting on the sidelines of the war. They would need to be properly prepared for battle if they wanted to help, and no one else seemed keen on offering to do it. So he stepped in. And if Voldemort ever got the audacity to attack Hogwarts directly, he would find himself up against an army with Harry at its head.

That was why Harry had changed the DA to the HA. They were not Dumbledore's army. They didn't fight for Dumbledore like the Order of the Phoenix did. The adults saw them as children, incapable of helping in the war effort. He saw them as people who weren't even given a chance. He would raise an army within the walls of Hogwarts. What better to call them than the Hogwarts Army? Maybe after the students graduated Hogwarts, those that planned to take active roles

in the war would be better prepared and thus more productive and more likely to survive.

Harry spent the majority of the day in solitary contemplation. He only had one class the entire day, double DADA after lunch. Before lunch he had trained. After class, Harry retreated to his office where he remained thinking about everything until dinner rolled around. Ginny was the one who had reminded Harry that he should eat. She appeared in his office shortly after 5:00 to drag him down to the Great Hall.

“Come on. Off your arse, Potter,” she demanded as she stomped into the room. Harry jumped off the armchair and had stunned her before he even realized what was happening. In a flash he rushed forward and caught her as she fell backwards. He sent a burst of magic through his hands into her body, enervating her. Her eyes blinked open, and she was surprised to find herself in Harry’s arms.

“What happened?” she asked him groggily.

“You startled me,” he explained half defensively, half apologetically. “I guess I was a bit jumpy and stunned you before I even knew what was going on.” He blushed slightly and had a sheepish smile.

“Right,” she said after a moment. “No sneaking up on Harry unless you want to get blasted off your feet. I’ll have to make a note of that.” He frowned faintly as he looked down on her, so she quickly changed tactics. “It’s alright, Harry. I shouldn’t have come barging in here yelling like that. I guess I was asking for trouble.”

“I’m sorry for stunning you,” he said at length.

“Don’t worry about it.” She paused for a moment looking at him pointedly. “You gonna set me upright sometime soon? Or were you planning on sweeping me off my feet?” She shot him a dazzling smile.

He returned with a grin “Well the offer is tempting. Oh, what the hell?” And she was in his arms before she knew what hit her.

He made it out into the hallway before she even registered what was going on and thought to react. "Harry," she laughed. "Put me down," she ordered, punching his arm.

"Careful there, Gin," he warned her. "Keep attacking me like that and I just might drop you."

"Don't you dare Potter," she threatened. "Now put me down right this instant."

"As you wish," he said as he set her down on the ground.

"That's better," she said as they began walking toward the Great Hall.

They walked together in companionable silence until he turned to her and said, "Thanks for coming to get me, Gin. I was lost in my own little world there and hadn't realized the time."

"You're welcome, Harry."

Dinner passed by both much too slowly and quickly for Harry. It seemed to drag by as his nerves built up, but it was over before he knew what hit him. His friends, led by Ginny's efforts, had tried to engross him in conversation to keep him relaxed, but he found he couldn't concentrate on much else but the meeting right after dinner. He appreciated his friends' efforts, but it just wasn't working.

After dinner ended Dumbledore rose from the head table to address the students. "I believe you are all aware of the informational meeting that will be held after dinner. I would ask all those in 4th year and above who are interested in joining Mr. Potter's club please remain in the Great Hall. All those in 3rd year or below or who are not interested in joining, you may head back to your common rooms.

There was a shuffling around the room as the younger students and some of the older ones left the hall. Harry noticed that the majority of students eligible to join had remained. The knot in his stomach tightened at the large group of people in the hall. His Adam's apple

bobbed as he audibly gulped. Dumbledore spoke up again. "Well, Harry, they're all yours."

He rose from his seat at the Gryffindor table and walked across the hall to the head table with every eye in the hall trained on him. His friends gave him reassuring smiles as he left the comfort of his familiar table. He strode to the head table and said, "Thank you, Headmaster." He took a moment to school his nerves before turning around to face the student body and casting a murmured "sonorous" on his throat. "Welcome," he announced, his voice ringing through the hall. "You are all here because you have some interest in joining the club that was formerly known as the DA. There are some things you should know before you make the decision to join."

"This is not an ordinary student run club. If my position as Assistant Professor wasn't enough to clue you in, then allow me to do so right now. It will be run as a class, like any other class that you take here at Hogwarts. I will be the professor of the class, which means I will be a figure of authority. If you join my classes, you will follow my orders, or you will be kicked out. This is not just some fun club to goof off and have fun with your friends. This is very serious, and it will be treated as such. We are at war. This class is to prepare you for that. It is inevitable that some of you will find yourselves in situations where your lives will be in danger. These classes will prepare you for those situations and hopefully give you the tools you need to survive the encounter.

"If you have no desire to learn how to fight, this is not the club for you. If you're not going to take this seriously, save yourself the trouble and don't sign up. I can promise you that I will show no favoritism in class. I will show no affinity for any house. You will all be treated equally. Not even my best friends should expect to be treated any differently than the rest of you. While we are in class, I am the professor, not your friend. I have the ability to give and take house points and to hand out detentions. I will not hesitate to use those abilities should the need arise.

"Now, those of you who are still interested in joining will be required to sign a magical contract before you will be allowed to attend my

classes.” Harry pulled the contract out of his robes and held it up in front of the student body. “The contract has only a few clauses involved, but they should be taken seriously. As I have said, I am not taking this lightly, and neither should you. If you have any reservations about any of the restrictions placed upon you by this contract, then do not sign it.

“Now, the contract states that by signing, you certify that you have absolutely no affiliation with Voldemort,” a collective gasp ran through the student body at the mention of his name, but Harry ploughed on as if nothing had happened, “or his Death Eaters and that you will never enter into the service of either. Anyone who is currently in the service of either or who plans to one day enter into the service of either will find themselves unable to sign the contract. I highly suggest that anyone in that camp refrain from even attempting. Anyone who does sign the contract and later decides to join Voldemort or his Death Eaters will be in for a nasty surprise. That’s all I will say about that.”

“You will also be certifying that you will not speak to anyone about what transpires in my classes to anybody who is not a member. This will include family members. You will be able to tell them that you have joined a club that is led by me, nothing else. If you try to say more, you will find yourself unable to do so. Should anyone manage to break through that hold, there are many other enchantments in place to suitably punish you for each infraction. The more you give away, the more devastating the punishments. I would not suggest testing the limits of this contract.”

“Anyone who is still interested in joining, please remain in the hall. All those who have no interest in joining, please leave the hall now.” Harry waited while a few groups of people left. There were many Slytherins who had waited around to see what would be said in the meeting who left grumbling. There were several Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws who left and a few Gryffindors as well. Harry noticed that Malfoy was still present and smirked, amused.

“Very well, I ask that you all come up and sign the contract.” Harry waited as nobody moved. They all stared at him as if he was off his

rocker. "Nothing more will be said tonight to anyone who has not signed this contract." He waved it in front of himself again. He placed it behind him at the Head Table and turned back toward the students expectantly.

Ginny shrugged at Ron and Hermione and stood from her seat. She strode forward confidently and smiled at Harry as she approached. She picked up the quill and signed her name on the piece of parchment. It glowed a soft blue for a moment then settled back down. "Nice speech, Harry," she muttered as she returned to her seat. Ron and Hermione went up and repeated her actions, followed by several other Gryffindors. The parchment glowed blue for every person.

Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs began standing and walking over to sign as well. Harry noticed rather proudly that the members of the DA were the ones that were taking the initiative and signing the contract first. They apparently trusted Harry. Harry greeted each person as they came up to sign. Cho Chang was among the Ravenclaws, and she gave Harry a smile as she lifted the quill to sign. Harry noticed that her friend, Marietta, was not in attendance. Soon enough, the rest of the Gryffindor table came up to sign. The Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs again followed suit. After they had all seated themselves, Harry looked pointedly at the Slytherin table. They were all staring at him intently, many unsure at what they should do.

"If you have no intention of signing this contract, I must ask that you leave the hall now," Harry informed them. Malfoy rose from the table glaring maliciously at him. The blonde haired Slytherin strutted across the hall and stood before Harry. Harry, for his part, merely looked unconcerned as Malfoy paused in front of him. He eventually walked over to the parchment and grabbed the quill into his hand. He pulled the quill into his body for a moment, hiding it from view, then signed his name. There was a moment of silence where nothing happened before the parchment glowed a violent red and Malfoy was thrown back ten feet in a blast of light.

Malfoy stood shakily and screeched, "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, Potter?"

“Did I forget to mention that the parchment is charmed to be impervious to charmed quills? Despite your rather lame attempt to switch quills without anybody noticing, your scheme was poorly thought out and executed. Did you really think I would be so stupid as to not prepare for something like this? Now why don’t you head back to your dungeon and let the rest of us get on with our meeting?” He said all this with a straight face.

Malfoy huffed and spun on his heel. The Great Hall immediately burst into laughter. “What are you laughing at?” the conceited Slytherin demanded. “What’s so funny?”

The hall only laughed harder as Draco screamed at them and stamped his feet on the ground in what he thought would be an authoritative manner but really came out as looking more like a temper tantrum thrown by a 5 year old. Malfoy huffed and walked as quickly out of the hall as he could manage without breaking out into a run.

Harry turned his attention back to the Slytherin table and addressed its occupants. “Any of you who are sincere will not have any trouble with the contract. I promise you that. Any of you who are trying to think of other ways around it, I would advise not to try it and just to leave now with your dignity.”

Harry again waited for the table to rise into some form of action. A few of the Slytherins left after a minute’s deliberation. Only eight occupants remained at the table. They were all exchanging glances between each other, unsure of how to proceed. Finally, after a few minutes, Blaise Zabini stood from his seat and strode toward Harry. He stopped in front of him and asked pointedly, “Did you mean what you said about treating all the houses equally? No favoritism?”

“Every word of it,” Harry replied solemnly, meeting Blaise’s gaze.

After a moment the brown haired boy nodded at Harry and stepped over to the contract. He lifted the quill and signed his name. After a moment the parchment emitted a soft blue light. Blaise watched it a moment longer to confirm his acceptance, nodded once to Harry,

then strode back to the Slytherin table. Bolstered by their housemate's initiative and subsequent acceptance, a couple more Slytherins rose from their seats and came forward. Among them Harry recognized Daphne Greengrass from his year. All eight remaining Slytherins signed the contract.

After they all returned to their seats, Harry addressed the room at large "Has everyone here signed the contract?" Nobody spoke up. Harry turned and picked up the piece of parchment. He held it out in front of him and quietly asked it to "Show me non-members." The Hogwarts staff members who remained in the hall all glowed red. Harry looked through the student body and noticed that none of his classmates were enveloped by the red light. "Finite," he whispered, tucking the contract into his robes.

"Excellent. Thank you all for your cooperation. Now, before I go on," Harry pulled out his wand and with a couple waves all the doors slammed closed and the strongest privacy charms he knew were placed on the large room. Students and staff members alike all shot each other questioning glances as Harry continued. "There, that's better. To start out, you will be split into two groups. Those of you who I taught last year, the former DA, will be in the intermediate class. All other members will start in the beginner class."

There were several groans from some of the older students, so Harry held up a hand to forestall the complaints. "Anyone in the lower class who I deem ready will be immediately moved to the intermediate class. But you will not move until I say you are fit, so do not even bother asking me about it beforehand. Each class will meet twice a week. The beginner class will meet Tuesday nights at 7:00 for a standard class, the intermediate Wednesday night at 7:00. On Sunday, the beginners will meet for a double class at 10:00, the intermediate at 1:00 for a double class.

"Classes will start next Tuesday," Harry informed the group. "If you are unable to attend, I expect to be notified in advance. Anyone who chooses not to attend without good reason will be permanently excused. As I said, this is a class, not some silly club, so it must be treated seriously. Anyone who does not attend a class will be

expected to make it up before the next class so as not to slow the rest of the group down. For those of you in the beginners class who feel you belong in the intermediate class now, your chance to prove yourself will be Tuesday. Don't bother trying to convince me beforehand.

"Classes will be held in the Room of Requirement. It can be found on the seventh floor across from the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy. The door will only appear when a class is about to start. So do not bother trying to use the room for anything else. Do not be late to classes. You will be punished as you would be in any other class. I would prefer not to have to assign detentions or take away house points, but I will do so if necessary. I will also have more creative means of ensuring your cooperation," he finished with a grin.

"Now, I should also inform you that we will no longer be known as the DA, which stood for Dumbledore's Army. The name was created as a joke because that was what the ministry was so afraid of last year, and that's what Umbridge was sent here to prevent from happening. I thought a renaming was in order, so you will be hence named the Hogwarts Army, HA for short."

"That's everything I had to say. Does anyone have any questions?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air. "Yes, Hermione?"

"What will we be learning in your classes?" she asked him.

"An excellent question," he remarked. "The beginning class will be starting with the basics. Expelliarmus, protego, impedimenta, stupefy and the like. The basic spells used in a duel. The intermediate class will begin where we left off last year, Patronus Charms. We'll cover more advanced dueling tactics as well as stronger shields, stunners, and other spells used to incapacitate your opponent. I should warn you, the classes will not be easy. It will be almost entirely practical, and you will be put through the paces on a regular basis."

He looked around the room. "Any other questions?"

Blaise Zabini spoke up from the Slytherin table, "What if we should decide we want out?"

"You'll be welcome to leave at any time, but you will still be bound by the contract," Harry informed him and the room at large. "My goal with the contract was to prevent not only word of what we are doing from getting out, but I didn't want to teach anybody who would become an enemy. The last thing I want to do is give the enemy more tools. After Voldemort is defeated, the contract will be voided, and you will all be able to speak freely about everything."

"Anything else?"

Zacharias Smith spoke up from the Hufflepuff table. "Is it true that you and some of the others from last year's DA got into a battle with Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic last June?"

"Err –" Harry stuttered. He looked over to the Gryffindor table at each of his friends that was there that night. Hermione and Ron were both giving him sympathetic looks. Ginny gave him an encouraging smile. Neville gave him a small, shy smile. Luna, over at the Ravenclaw table, just had a dreamy expression on her face, and Harry wasn't sure if she was even paying attention. He took a deep breath and continued, "I went to the ministry on information that my godfather was being tortured there by Voldemort. A few of my friends insisted on coming with me. We were led into a trap, and yes, we fought several Death Eaters. After holding them off for quite some time, we were eventually rescued," he explained, giving them the abbreviated version of events.

"Now, if there are no more questions about the HA then this concludes our meeting. I'll see the beginners' class on Tuesday at 7:00."

The students looked around at each other. Some stood and walked out of the hall, others hung around. Most of the former DA stuck around to talk to Harry briefly. He got comments like "Great speech," "Can't wait to get started," and "Bloody brilliant what you did to

Malfoy.” Eventually the hall emptied of everyone except Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

Harry turned to Ginny. “Thanks Gin, for a moment I was worried that no one would sign.”

“Don’t mention it Harry,” she told him with a smile. “I know you wouldn’t have us sign anything if it wasn’t perfectly safe and legit. I trust you. Now if Fred or George had asked me to sign a contract, that would be an entirely different story.”

“Well I appreciate it,” he told her. “And the two of you as well,” he added to Ron and Hermione. “That was nerve racking.”

“You did a good job, Harry,” Hermione told him honestly.

“And that bit with Malfoy was brilliant,” Ron added. “He looked ridiculous with his skin chalk white, the pink, rosy cheeks, the bright red nose and lipstick...priceless.”

“Well he can’t say I didn’t warn him,” Harry responded unconcernedly. “Come on; let’s head back up to the common room.”

The next day Harry found himself out on the Quidditch pitch in the late morning. The sun was shining brilliantly in the sky, hardly a cloud obscuring the blue expanse above him. Harry, for his part, was having the time of his life speeding around on his Firebolt, oblivious to everything going on around him at the time. He was looping in and out of the goal hoops, then shot across the pitch. He suddenly dropped into a vertical dive and pulled up just in time so only the tips of his feet grazed the grass growing on the field. Harry dropped his arm and felt the grass underneath him, a smile on his face.

“Oi, mate!” Ron’s loud voice reached Harry. “If you’re done showing off, we’ve got tryouts to run.”

Sufficiently cowed, Harry blushed slightly and flew over to his friend, who was standing before a group of hopeful Gryffindors with brooms

clutched tightly in their grasps. He landed next to the red head as he was beginning to address the crowd.

“Right, I’m Ron Weasley, captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team,” Ron proudly proclaimed, displaying his captain’s badge rather self-importantly. An image of Percy fawning over his own Head Boy badge rose unbidden into Harry’s mind, but he quickly shook off the thought. “I’m sure you all know that Harry, here, is our seeker,” he patted Harry on the shoulder. He put his other arm around Katie Bell’s shoulder and said, “This here is Katie Bell, chaser, and I’m keeper. We’ll be holding tryouts for all positions as I’d like to have a reserve team this year.”

“Right,” Ron ran a hand nervously through his hair. “Why don’t you all take a few minutes in the sky to get warmed up, then we’ll get started. I’ll call you all back down in a bit.”

Harry sidled up to his friend as they turned their heads skyward to watch the recruits fly around. “So how do you want to do this?” Harry asked. Katie walked up beside them.

“Well, I was thinking I’d have them split up into what position they were trying out for, then take them in turns,” Ron replied.

“Sounds fair,” Harry announced. “Mind if I take a few minutes to fly with them?” Harry was itching to get back out on his Firebolt.

“Yeah, sure,” Ron said distractedly. Harry shrugged and took off. There were two activities in his life that left Harry feeling completely at peace, as if the world just made complete sense. They were both flying. One was flying on his Firebolt; the other was flying as an owl. The feeling was incredibly freeing, which was exactly what Harry was searching for in his life: freedom. Freedom from the war, from his fame, from the death surrounding him, from his life in general, from the people like Dumbledore that always tried to control him...Harry just needed to get away from it all. With the air rushing all around him as he flew, he felt like none of that could touch him.

Soon enough Ron was calling all of them back down. "Alright, I want you all to split up based on position. Those trying out for chaser stand over there, beaters there, keepers there, and seekers over there," he directed, pointing to different spots on the pitch. The Gryffindors all obligingly walked to the designated spots and awaited further instructions. "We'll be doing the tryouts in turns. Since there doesn't appear to be anyone trying out for seeker, Harry why don't you take the beaters. Katie and I will start with some ball drills with the chasers and keepers."

Harry nodded his assent to Ron and turned to the group of beaters as Ron and Katie took the chasers and keepers into the air. Ginny shot him a grin as he briefly caught her eye before she took off after her brother

Harry had the five beaters all introduce themselves. They took their bats up into the air and he had them just beat a bludger back and forth between each other. One of the five clearly lacked the hand eye coordination to make the cut. The other four seemed to be able to handle the simple activity without any trouble. He eventually had them start shooting at targets, and by targets Harry ended up meaning himself. He had them all take turns hitting bludgers at him as he raced around the pitch. In the end, Harry decided that there really wasn't anyone better than Kirke and Sloper from the year before. Pritchett, a fourth year boy, would make a decent reserve.

After sending the beaters down to the ground, Harry went over to see how Ron and Katie were doing. Ron was keeping against the chaser hopefuls, so Harry flew up next to Katie as she observed. Harry watched as each chaser in turn tried to score against Ron. Ginny, Harry noted with some satisfaction, was by far the best of the bunch. Her flying was top notch, despite the old broom she was riding. Her turns and fakes were sharp, and her accuracy was spot on. Ron blocked a fair few of her shots, but she got a majority of them in.

There was another girl who Harry thought might be in Ginny's year who seemed to be faring pretty well. A boy who couldn't have been more than a 3rd year, in Harry's estimation anyway, showed some promise as well. Harry continued to watch until all the chasers had

taken their shots. Ron flew over to them and asked Harry, "How'd it go with the beaters?"

"Alright, I guess," Harry told his friend with a shrug. "Much as I hate to say it, Kirke and Sloper are the best we've got. The Pritchett kid will make a decent reserve."

"Fair enough," Ron said. "What did you guys think about the chasers?"

Katie spoke up first. "Ginny was by far the best. She'll take one starting spot. The other one is a toss up between Nate and Stephanie. Whichever doesn't get the job plus Dan should be offered reserves."

Harry asked who Stephanie, Nate and Dan were before adding his own comments. "I definitely agree about Ginny. Based on what I saw, I'd say Stephanie for the last starting spot. But I agree with Nate and Dan as reserves."

Ron nodded his agreement. "I agree with you guys. We can name Stephanie as a starter for now, but we can always change it later if we decide Nate is better. Let's go down and tell them the news, then have the keepers block against our three chasers." Katie and Harry nodded, and the three descended to the ground where all the hopefuls were gathered.

"Alright," Ron started. "We've made our decision on beaters and chasers. Our starting beaters will be Kirke and Sloper, and our reserve will be Pritchett." The two starters shared a high five with each other, then cuffed the other boy who would be playing behind them on his shoulders. "Our starting chasers are as follows: Katie Bell, Ginny Weasley, and Stephanie Owens. For reserve chasers we have Nate Torrent and Dan Hopkins. Keep in mind that just because you are a starter or a reserve now does not guarantee that you will stay that way all season. I will always play the best player in each position."

"Thank you to all of you who have tried out for both chaser and beater. We only have the reserve keeper spot to fill. Anyone on the

team must stay until the end of tryouts. The rest of you are welcome to stay or go, whatever you'd like. Thanks again for trying out. Now if my three starting chasers would please take to the air, we can begin having our keepers blocking goals."

Harry and Ron both watched from up in the air as the three keepers were each put through the paces by the chasers. The choice wasn't very difficult, as one of the three had clearly blocked more goals than the other two. So Kyle Stevens was chosen as the reserve beater. Ron thanked the other two for trying out as they descended to the ground. He called together all of the players he had given spots on the team to make some announcements. He told them all that he had yet to put together a practice schedule and that he would let them all know as soon as he booked the pitch. With that taken care of, the group all headed back to the castle.

Chapter 6: An Army in the Making

The rest of the weekend flew by relatively quickly. Harry got a lot of reading done and snuck away to train whenever he could manage it. He found his nightly sessions with Sirius shortening in length and focusing less on dueling. His godfather just couldn't quite keep up with Harry very well any more. Harry used that time to try out some new spells and just to talk to his godfather. He would tell the man about his day and everything that happened to him. Sirius would return with some stories from his own days at Hogwarts with his father and Remus and Peter. He usually downplayed Peter's role in all of the stories, but Harry didn't mind. It's not like he really wanted to think about the man who had betrayed his parents and sent him to his death.

On Sunday Harry sent a letter to Remus with Hedwig. He had decided it was time to start helping the werewolf out. He had some fragile information to get to Remus, so the letter he sent was very carefully worded.

Dear Remus,

I managed to finish that project I had been working on. I struggled with it a bit before I was able to cat onto it. Now I don't have any problems with it. I thought maybe I'd be able to help you out with your problem now. My calendar is almost full, but I'm sure I could find the time to help about once a month. We could meet at your old spot.

School's going ok. We had a club meeting on Friday that went pretty well. I start teaching on Tuesday. Quidditch tryouts were yesterday. They went pretty well. I think we have a pretty decent team this year. Not as solid as it has been, but we have a lot of new additions who are bound to improve with some practice. We shouldn't get whumped, at any rate. Let me know if you'll be able to make it this month.

Take care,

Harry

He thought that he did a fairly decent job of disguising the meaning to anyone should they intercept the letter, yet at the same time he didn't imagine Remus would have a terrible time figuring it out.

Harry kept up his morning routine of jogging around the grounds and working out in the room of requirement. Not only was it helping Harry stay in shape, he found it also left him feeling good about himself. He felt refreshed after the routine every morning. Even during the week it left him feeling ready to face the day.

Tuesday morning, Hedwig arrived with the regular owl post during breakfast. Harry excitedly took the parchment and noted who it was from. He stuffed it into his bag deciding he'd read it later. He didn't want anyone else to know what Remus had written.

"Who's the letter from, Harry?" Hermione inquired from across the table.

"Remus," Harry told her simply.

"Oh?" she returned. "Why aren't you reading it? Don't you want to know what it says?"

"I'll read it later," he retorted with a hint of warning in his voice.

If Hermione caught the hint, she didn't acknowledge it. "Why not just read it now? I'm sure we'd all like to know how he's doing. I haven't heard from Professor Lupin in a long time, and I'd like to hear what he has to say."

Harry glared at her sharply. "Then why don't you send him an owl yourself and ask him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked him sardonically.

"It means that some things of mine are private. Just because I get a letter from someone doesn't mean you get to read it. I don't ask you for all the details of the ones you get from your parents. The letters were sent to you, not to me, and I respect that. Apparently asking for

the same courtesy is out of the question.” He stood from his seat while he was speaking and proceeded to walk out of the hall quickly before their argument went any farther. Hermione could really push his buttons, and he didn’t want to end up saying anything he might later regret.

Ginny glared at Hermione from across the table where she had been sitting next to Harry. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you?” she asked the prefect. “Can’t you see that by constantly pushing him to talk you’re only pushing him farther away?”

Hermione looked at Ginny sharply. “He can’t keep everything bottled up inside. He needs to let us know what’s going on.”

Ginny just huffed and said, “You are unbelievable.” She followed Harry’s example and stalked out of the hall leaving a visibly upset Hermione and a flustered Ron in her wake. She caught up with Harry in the hallway and searched her mind for something to say to him. She found nothing that she thought would help so she went with, “Hermione can be a real cow sometimes.”

Harry turned around at the sound of her voice, startled to find her there. “Yeah,” he said sullenly. “I know she means well, but she just doesn’t know when to quit. She thinks that every one needs to deal with their problems by talking about them. And she seems to think that she’s the one I should be talking to. I mean, honestly...did she really think that a booklet detailing the five stages of grief was what I needed for my birthday?”

Ginny couldn’t help it. She tried valiantly to hold it back, but nothing could have stopped it. She snorted and collapsed in a fit of laughter. She looked up at Harry’s face to see him smiling at her as she continued to giggle from the floor. As her shaking subsided and she began breathing regularly again, he offered her a hand up. She gratefully took it, and he hoisted her off the ground with relative ease. “I’m sorry, Harry. I honestly don’t know what to tell you. I’ve tried talking some sense into her, told her to back off and let you come to her, but she’s relentless. Once she gets an idea in her head, nothing will stop her.”

“Don’t I know it,” he replied ruefully. He shook his head clear of his thoughts of Hermione and smiled at Ginny again. “Thanks for coming after me, Gin. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome Harry,” she replied. “I told you I’ll be there for you whenever you might need me, and I meant it. I won’t push you for information. I’ll just be there whenever you’re ready to talk or if you just need some company.”

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but thanks,” Harry told her.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Need we go over this again, Potter? If not for the fact that you’re a decent bloke and deserve the comfort of a true friend anyway, then the fact that you’ve saved my life a couple times ought to be reason enough.”

He grinned cheekily at her. “Oh, I know. I just enjoy hearing you praise me so.”

She pushed him into the wall and shouted, “You’re an arse, Potter.” She ran down the hallway and called over her shoulder “I’m off to class. Don’t want to be late.” Harry laughed as he tried to glare at her retreating form.

The rest of the day went by more smoothly than breakfast had gone. In DADA and Potions, Harry and Hermione hardly spoke to each other. Harry was mad at Hermione’s persistent nagging for information. He hated that she felt like she could treat him as just another mystery to solve. She was mad that Harry was continually shutting her out. But as the day wore on, the tension between them began to dissipate.

Harry read Remus’ reply after potions class. He retired to his office as Hermione went to Ancient Runes. As soon as he entered, he sat at his desk and tore open the envelope.

Dear Harry,

That's great. Congratulations. It really means a lot to me that you want to help me so much. I think the old hideout should work fine. You know when to meet me there.

I'm glad to hear that things with your club and Quidditch seem to be going well. You'll have to keep me updated on how your classes go. Teaching can be a rather rewarding experience, as I learned a few years ago. I hope that you enjoy it.

I can't really say anything much about what's going on in a letter for obvious reasons. Perhaps we'll find a chance to talk in person soon.

With Regard,

Remus Lupin

He was eager to see Remus but was weary of the circumstances it would be under. There were still a couple weeks left until the full moon, so he didn't dwell too much on it at the moment. He would have plenty of time to think on it later. Instead, Harry concentrated on his first HA class that night. Since it was the beginner class and he was starting them off where he had started the DA last year, there wasn't much planning to be done. Harry still found himself nervous about the class though. It was a larger group than the DA had been last year with well over 50 members. He hoped that he would be able to advance several of the new members into the intermediate class quickly to even the two classes out a bit.

After dinner, Harry went straight to the Room of Requirement to get everything ready. The room was similar to the one they had used last year, only bigger. A slightly raised small stage stood at the front of the room with a podium on it. As Harry walked up he noticed a whistle sitting there. He slipped it around his neck and began to think about how he would address the class to start. He needed to be authoritative but didn't want to seem unapproachable. It was going to be a very fine line between Professor Potter and Harry. He wouldn't let anyone call him Professor Potter, but that was the name he'd assigned to his HA persona.

As 7:00 drew nearer, students began filing into the room. Harry waited at the podium. He had the contract with him so that he could make sure nobody tried to sneak in that didn't belong in the class. At 7:00 he checked for anyone who hadn't signed, but no red light was seen throughout the room. Harry nodded his approval and began.

"Welcome, all of you, to the first class of the HA. You will all be starting out where the DA started last year with the basics of dueling. It's best to make sure you have the basics down before you move onto anything else. Without the basics, nothing else will really matter." Harry paused to let this information sink in. "With that said, we will begin by practicing expelliarmus."

There were some groans heard from some of the older students at this, but Harry held up a hand to forestall their complaints. "I'll tell you the same thing I told the DA last year: this spell saved my life against Voldemort." The usual gasp at the name swept through the crowd. Harry didn't bother to tell them that it was actually the fact that he and Voldemort had brother wands that had saved his life. What they didn't know couldn't hurt them.

"Those of you who prove to be adept at the spell will be able to quickly move on. But for now, I want everybody to partner up and begin practicing. I want you to trade off casting the spell at each other. I don't want to see any spells but expelliarmus being cast. That means no shields as well. I need to be able to see how powerful your spell is. It won't do any good if you're not able to even rip the wand out of your opponent's hand. Well, go on, pair off."

Harry waited as they followed his orders. "Begin." And they did. Harry walked through the students correcting anyone who needed it. He was happy to note that nobody tried casting any other spells. Several of the older students were only half-heartedly casting the spell. Harry walked over to one such student. Harry thought he was a Ravenclaw 7th year but wasn't sure.

"Let's see you cast that spell on me," Harry said to the boy. He drew his wand and waited as he went through the wand motion and sent the spell flying at Harry. Harry absorbed it and flinched at the impact

but kept a tight grip on his wand. "That's one of the weakest spells I've ever felt. You'd have trouble disarming a first year with it. Now when I tell you to cast a spell, I mean cast the spell. Like this:" Harry waved his wand in a flash and shouted, "Expelliarmus."

The Ravenclaw was lifted bodily off the ground and thrown several feet back as his wand flew through the air. Harry reached out a hand and caught the wand as it sailed past. "Do you see the difference? Cast properly, this spell can be extremely helpful. But if you don't put some effort into it, you'll just end up embarrassing yourself. Now continue practicing with your partner." He turned to the rest of the class who had all stopped their own practicing to watch him. "All of you: back to work," he ordered.

The rest of the class went by smoothly. He asked a handful of students to stay after the class who had all seemed to be doing pretty well with the spells he had gotten them to try. Among the students were Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin, Lisa Turpin and Stephen Cornfoot of Ravenclaw, Walter Gattton of Hufflepuff, and Rob Bankston and Julie Wesmer of Gryffindor.

When the rest of the students had left he addressed them. "You all showed promise, and I'd like to take a bit of time to test you all further to see if you're ready for the intermediate class," he informed them. "I'm just going to run you through some different hexes and curses as well as protego to shield yourself. If you're unfamiliar with any of the spells I have you try, don't hesitate to ask me how to do it. If you already know all the spells, I'll move you up right away. If you don't know everything, I'll work to make sure you get there soon so that you can join the intermediate class as soon as possible. I won't let anyone join until they are completely caught up with the others."

Harry ran through a whole bunch of spells with them in a short amount of time. They had all known most of the spells. Some had problems with a couple spells, but they were soon rectified. After an hour of work with them, he was satisfied with the results. "Excellent work everyone. I think you're all ready to join the intermediate class. The first lesson is tomorrow at 7:00. Don't be late." With that, Harry dismissed them.

Harry was happy with how the first lesson had gone. There hadn't been any challenges to his authority. Everyone had for the most part taken his instructions without complaint after his demonstration with the Ravenclaw. Harry found that even the Slytherin members seemed to be following his commands without any resistance, for which he was rather pleased. They had seemed mutinous to start when he had mentioned they were starting with expelliarmus, Zabini in particular. But after promising the more advanced members that they'd get their chance to prove themselves followed by his exhibition with the Ravenclaw, all visible protests were squashed.

Harry wasn't sure how his former DA would react to the new members that would be in their midst tomorrow, but they would have to get used to the idea. He was especially worried about how the Slytherins would be treated. There was a small group in the previous class, so they would still be able to band together when need be. Only two Slytherins would be in the intermediate class tomorrow.

There hadn't been any conflicts in class between the students, but Harry could tell that the rest of the students were apprehensive about the Slytherin members. The tension was thick between the other three houses and the house of snakes. Harry knew he would have to keep an eye on it. He hoped that everyone would be able to look past their house boundaries and accept each other as members of the HA, but he didn't expect sweeping changes over night. He knew it would take time for them to learn to trust each other. But he would work on it with them.

He retired back to the common room and found his friends waiting on him. The minute he walked over they began asking questions.

"How did it go? Did you get a lot accomplished in the first lesson?" Hermione asked eagerly.

Ron, on the other hand, asked more scathingly, "Did those Slytherins cause any problems? I don't know why you even let them join, Harry. I don't care if they signed the contract you wrote up. They're bad news, every one of them."

Hermione abandoned the line of questioning she had for Harry to reprimand Ron. "That's exactly the kind of attitude that is preventing us from making any progress in inter-house unity, Ronald Weasley. If you would just shut your mouth and open your eyes, you might notice that not all Slytherins are Draco Malfoy."

"They don't have to be Draco Malfoy to be evil. They're snakes, Hermione. Every last one of them evil. Trust me, the less we have to do with them the better."

"I can talk to snakes, you know," Harry interrupted his friends' arguing. "Does that make me evil?"

Ron turned toward Harry and looked at him as if he'd sprouted another head. "What are you on about mate? Of course you're not evil. It doesn't matter that you can talk to snakes. The point is that they're in Slytherin. You're a Gryffindor mate."

"The sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin," Harry informed his friends. "It only put me in Gryffindor because I asked it to." Ron looked shocked at this statement. Hermione was smiling at him. "And in case you forgot," Harry added, "Peter Pettigrew was a Gryffindor as well."

The color left Ron's face at that statement. Hermione looked like the cat that just caught the canary. She seemed smug that Ron had finally been put in his place and set straight about the Slytherins. He could be really thick headed and stubborn sometimes.

"Anyway," Harry said, breaking the silence that had descended over the trio. "The class went well. We'll have a handful of new members tomorrow. I've got some reading to do before I go to bed, so I'll catch up with you two later."

That night Harry talked to Sirius about his first HA class and the reply he had received from Remus. Sirius was ecstatic that Harry would be filling in where he and James had left off in helping Remus get through his monthly transformations. Harry covered what he had gone over in the class and the handful of students that he had

already moved to his advanced class. He shared his worries about the two Slytherins that would be coming to the class the next evening. It was easier to have the Slytherins in the other group because not only did they have more numbers there, but that entire group was new.

Blaise and Daphne were coming into an already existing group. And it was just the two of them from Slytherin. Harry didn't think the others would have much trouble accepting the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw additions because they each already had housemates in the class. That would give them a niche to start in while they became comfortable. The Slytherins didn't have that luxury.

What worried Harry most, however, was the fact that he couldn't even rely on his best friends for support. He knew Ron was going to be an issue tomorrow when Blaise and Daphne showed up. Ron would be a catalyst, and Harry knew that others would rally behind him. Ron really did have a terrible temper, and he was so thick headed that he never thought outside of his own little world. Hermione would be on his side as far as accepting them into the group, but she was likely to fly off the handle at Ron which would only make things worse.

Harry wasn't exactly sure what to expect from Ginny. Hopefully she wouldn't have much of a problem accepting the Slytherins, and maybe she'd even be able to help diffuse any arguments that might arise between Ron and Hermione. Neville was too shy and soft spoken to be much of a help or a hindrance, and Luna was just Luna. Harry just really hoped that he wouldn't have to hand out detentions or take away house points from any of his friends. Sirius listened patiently to all of Harry's concerns. He was amused to no end whenever Harry brought up Ginny. Harry received a lot of teasing about his friendship with the red haired girl, but he took it all in stride. His godfather was just trying to get a rise out of him, but Harry found he didn't really care all that much.

Sirius warned him that he shouldn't be quick to level out punishments because it could easily lead to a feeling of resentment. He said that it was always a point of interest within the Marauder clan after Remus was made prefect and then James head boy. When emotions were running high, if either one ever played the authority card, the conflict

would only escalate as a result. This advice only made Harry even more weary, but he was determined to diffuse any conflict quickly and by any means necessary. If his friends got mad at him, they'd get over it eventually.

And that was the attitude that Harry held going into his HA class on Wednesday night. He arrived early again, to make sure everything was set up correctly and that he was ready when 7:00 rolled around. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Neville were the first to arrive, walking through the door at quarter to 7:00. Harry smiled at the show of support from his friends. Luna entered alone not long after, and the rest of the class filtered in shortly thereafter.

As Blaise and Daphne walked through the door a minute before 7:00 Harry could feel the air stiffen around him. Ron was glaring openly at the new arrivals as were several other members including Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, and Zacharias Smith to name a couple. "What are they doing here?" Ron bit out beside him.

"They're here for class," Harry responded evenly. "I told you we'd have a few new members this evening."

"You didn't tell me they'd be Slytherins," Ron nearly shouted. His raised voice caught the attention of most of the room.

"That hardly matters," Harry replied coolly. "Like I said last Friday, house doesn't matter to me in these classes. I will treat everyone the same regardless of their house. They both knew enough to warrant a spot in this class, so they are both here."

"But how can you trust them?" Ron asked incredulously. "You're teaching the enemy."

"Slytherins are not the enemy, Ron," Hermione chimed in. "I'm sure if we just reach out to them we'll find that most of them are actually quite nice."

"Right," Ron scathingly replied. "Let's all just have one big group hug with the snakes. That sounds just peachy."

“You are impossible,” Hermione shrieked at Ron. “You’re honestly no better than Malfoy. You treat Slytherins the same way he treats muggleborns.”

“I can’t believe you’re defending them,” Ron bit back. “They’re Slytherins, Hermione. It’s not like they haven’t done anything to deserve it. Am I right?” here Ron addressed the crowd, exactly what Harry had been afraid of. There were some nods of assent, and a few people vocalized their agreement. “Slytherins have been taunting and attacking us for year. They always fight dirty. We can’t trust them. This is ridiculous.”

“Ron, you’re a prefect; you should be setting a good example,” Hermione lectured. “Honestly, why they ever thought you’d make a decent prefect I’ll never know. I have to force you to do everything.”

Throughout the entire spectacle, Blaise and Daphne had stood against the wall watching how everything would play out. They were not happy with the reception their entrance caused, nor were they surprised. They watched curiously as friends argued back and forth over them. They didn’t like the way either side was handling things. Weasley was being a thick headed git, and Granger was acting like some humanitarian trying to do them all a favor. Reaching out to the Slytherins...did she seriously think like that? They didn’t really care about their argument though. It was Harry’s reaction that they were really interested in. They were not disappointed.

“That’s enough!” Harry barked loudly. “Hermione, now is not the time for this. If you have your problems with Ron, take them up outside of class.” Ron looked smug over Hermione getting yelled at. His smile disappeared when Harry’s glare shifted. “One more word out of you Ron and you’ll be spending the rest of the week in detention. They’re here because I invited them here. If they weren’t trustworthy, they wouldn’t have been able to join in the first place. I made sure of that. If you don’t like it, you’re free to leave at any time. If you plan on staying, then you’ll have to get used to it. I don’t want to hear any more of this. Have I made myself clear?”

Ron glared at Harry but didn't respond. Harry continued addressing the entire crowd. "That goes for the rest of you as well. I will not tolerate this kind of behavior. Everyone who is here has been welcomed here by me. I expect all of you to be able to work together while you are here. If you want to hate each other outside this class, I won't stop you."

"Now, we will be picking up where we left off last year with the Patronus charm. As most of you should know by now, the dementors have joined Voldemort," again a collective shudder accompanied by several gasps greeted the name. Harry paused, shaking his head. "You're all going to get have to get used to hearing that name. On second thought, you'll all have to get used to saying the name. Anyone who uses some stupid pseudonym like You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or Dark Lord in these classes will lose house points. You're all here because you want to learn how to fight back. If you fear Voldemort so much that you can't even use his name, you'll be useless if he ever shows up."

He looked through the crowd searchingly and was satisfied that his message had been heard clearly. "Alright, now that that's settled, let's get to work. The Patronus Charm is very difficult to perform under the best of circumstances and requires intense concentration. Can anyone tell me what the most important aspect of the charm is?" Harry looked out at the crowd of students. Unsurprisingly, Hermione's hand shot up immediately. Several others raised their hands as well. "Cho" Harry selected.

She smiled brilliantly at Harry as she stood up to her full height and recited, "The Patronus Charm requires the caster to focus an extremely happy memory to function properly."

"You are correct," Harry praised her. "That is the most common explanation you would find in a test book; however it is incomplete. Can anybody tell me why?" Not even Hermione's hand rose into the air this time. In fact, she seemed insulted at the fact that Harry was implying that he knew more about the charm than the textbooks.

“You can conjure a Patronus with a happy memory, but it’s not exactly necessary. You must focus on an extremely powerful positive thought or emotion. You have to immerse yourself in that emotion as you cast the spell in order to conjure a fully corporeal Patronus. A happy memory is most often used simply because it is an easy way to bring about that positive emotion. If you associate a specific person or event to that powerful emotion you will often find your Patronus will take on a form that resembles that person or event in some way. For example, I was thinking of my dad when I first conjured a Patronus, and it took the form of my dad’s animagus, a stag. As you go through life, you may find that your Patronus will change forms corresponding to where you find your happiest thoughts.

“ Now, the proper wand movement is as follows:” Harry demonstrated the wand movements from atop the stage. “The incantation is Expecto Patronum.” Harry focused inwardly on his happy thoughts and bellowed “Expecto Patronum.” A silver stag erupted from the tip of his wand and cantered around the stage to the applause of the students. “Now I want you all to take several minutes to focus on your happy thoughts and memories before you try. Remember: the more powerful emotion you’re feeling, the greater the result will be.”

The students all looked at each other for a moment before setting to the task. Most closed their eyes as they drifted through their thoughts to find the happiest ones they had. Within a couple minutes most people had smiles on their faces as they were immersing themselves in their happiness. There were some exceptions to this, though. Ron, in particular, still held a scowl on his face. Blaise Zabini’s face looked impassive. Hermione looked slightly annoyed but mostly reflected a mask of concentration.

Harry finally announced, “When you think you’re ready, you may begin.” Only a couple people remained still while the rest of the class began waving their wands and the words “Expecto Patronum” rang out across the hall. There had only been two people who were able to produce a corporeal Patronus last year before the lesson was interrupted. Harry remembered that lesson vividly because not only was it the last DA meeting, it was also the day that Dumbledore left

Hogwarts. He remembered how bad he had felt when it was his club that had been the cause of Dumbledore's problems with the law. They had tried to arrest him. He realized now that it would have happened eventually regardless. It was only a matter of time before they managed to get him out of Hogwarts and Umbridge in as the interim Headmistress.

Harry shook himself out of his musings and looked around the room. He spotted Cho's swan Patronus easily as it was the only corporeal Patronus in the room. He scratched his chin as he searched out Hermione to see what happened to her otter. He spotted her bushy brown hair easily enough but found that she was struggling with the spell. She was able to produce a thick silvery mist that looked to be on the verge of taking form but couldn't quite make it.

Harry decided to keep an eye on his friend while he began to walk around and offer help to those that were struggling. He congratulated Cho on her swan and asked her to practice it a couple more times, then to help others around her with the spell. He corrected a couple people on their grips and wand movements as he went on and encouraged those who were producing mist to concentrate hard on their happy memories or to try to find something better to focus on.

He eventually made it to Hermione, who was still only able to produce the thick silvery mist, much to her consternation. She already looked incredibly frustrated. He asked her, "How's it coming, Hermey?"

She half pouted and half smiled at the nickname Hagrid's giant half brother, Grawp, used for her. "I just don't get it. I was able to do this last time, and now I can't. I don't understand why." You could almost feel the tension in her voice.

"Hermione, are you frustrated?" Harry asked her bluntly.

"Well of course I am," she snapped at him. "Last year I was able to do this, and now I can't."

"Well did you ever think that that may be part of the problem?" he asked her calmly.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll never be able to conjure a Patronus in that frame of mind. Take five or ten minutes to sit down, relax, and calm down. Find yourself some happy thoughts to focus on, then try again. I guarantee it will help.”

She gave him a tentative smile and turned toward one of the walls where a couch suddenly appeared. She gave the room a grin and walked over to the couch. She sat down, closed her eyes, and began to relax. Harry turned to Ron, who was still scowling and having absolutely no luck producing anything at all.

“You’ll never get anything if you keep up like that,” Harry told his friend.

“What do you know?” Ron retorted sharply.

“I know that you’re upset right now and that you’re not really concentrating on any happy thoughts.”

“And just how do you know that?” he asked.

“Well, my first clue was that scowl on your face. The slightly flushed look you’ve got was another hint. The fact that most everyone else in the room besides you is smiling helped to solidify that conclusion. Plus there’s the fact that you were pretty upset at the start of class,” Harry explained candidly.

“Well maybe if I didn’t have to keep an eye out for those bloody Slytherins I’d find it a little easier to relax,” Ron replied icily.

“I’m warning you right now, Ron. I won’t tolerate your attitude in my classes. Blaise and Daphne are here because I invited them. I promise you that you have nothing to worry about from them. I realize that you have a lifetime’s worth of prejudices and stereotypes to work through, but not every Slytherin is guaranteed to be evil. Not every Slytherin is a Malfoy or a Tom Riddle. If you can’t understand that,

then at least respect me enough to handle things should they get out of hand, but I will not allow any more outbursts like today, alright?" Harry was struggling valiantly not to raise his voice at his stubborn friend.

"Whatever you say, professor," Ron responded, turning his back on Harry and ending the conversation.

Harry sighed to himself and continued his rounds. He made sure that he stopped by each of the new members to welcome them and offer guidance. Everyone else had already had one lesson, well half a lesson anyway, before, but the new members were most likely performing the spell for the first time. When he came around to Blaise and Daphne, the two Slytherins, he found himself compelled to apologize for the behavior of his class.

"I'm sorry about everything," he told them, gesturing to the room at large. "They're really not bad people, just have the wrong idea about a few things. They'll come around eventually." 'Hopefully,' he added in his head.

Blaise nodded in agreement. "Don't worry about it, Harry. We didn't exactly expect a warm welcome."

"But we do appreciate the fact that you're sticking up for us," Daphne chimed in sincerely. "It's not easy being at odds with your friends, so it's nice to know that you're willing to go to that length for us."

Harry looked down at his shoe laces for a moment while he willed the heat not to rise to his face at the praise. "It was the least I could do. I promised you guys that I'd be fair, and I meant it. I only wish I could talk some sense into every one else. There's a few in there that you'll find have no problem at all, but unfortunately those aren't the outspoken ones." Harry shook his head to clear his thoughts and shifted topics. "Well enough about that, how are your Patronuses coming along? Let's see what you can do."

Blaise was able to produce a strong mist that, like Hermione's before, seemed to be on the verge of taking form but not quite there. Daphne, on the other hand, was barely getting any results. He noticed that her grip on her wand was a little too loose, causing some of her wand movements to lose their precision. So he spoke up. "Daphne, try tightening your grip on your wand. It should help make your wand movement more accurate."

She gave him a nod and tried again, this time with a firmer grip. As she said the incantation "Expecto Patronum" a bright, silvery cloud burst out of her wand. It seemed to be trying to form something but the image was vague. It looked to be some sort of bird. A bright smile lit up her face, and she turned to him. "Thanks Harry."

He returned her grin and said, "Anytime. Keep it up and you should have a fully corporeal Patronus in no time." He turned to Blaise who was congratulating his friend. "Yours is right on the verge of forming, Blaise, but something seems to be holding it back. You may want to try to find a better thought or memory and see if that helps." Blaise gave him a nod. "Well, keep it up, you two. I'm off to make my rounds." They gave him a wave as he moved on to help others with the charm.

By the time the class was about over, Daphne had managed to create a hawk Patronus. Blaise's Patronus was vaguely taking the form of some bear-like creature. Hermione was able to reproduce the otter that she had made the previous year, and several others added their own animals to the mix as well. Harry made his way back to the stage at the front of the class. He lifted the whistle that he had placed around his neck before the start of class to his lips and blew in it to gain the attention of the class.

"Thank you," he said as everyone stopped what they were doing to turn towards him. "We're just about out of time. I want to congratulate all those who were able to conjure a corporeal Patronus. For those of you that were unable to get yours to take form, don't get discouraged. It is really advanced magic that many adult wizards are unable to perform. We will revisit Patronuses for the beginning of class on Sunday before moving on. I should warn you that you may see some

physical activity in class on Sunday, so I would advise everyone to dress appropriately. Thanks again for coming.”

With that said, he stepped off the podium as most of the crowd exited the room. Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and surprisingly Cho lingered behind. Ron left with the rest of the group, obviously still upset. The other four milled on the other side of the room as Cho approached Harry. “I just wanted to say it was a very good lesson today, Harry,” she said with a warm smile.

“Er, thanks, Cho” Harry replied, a little uncomfortable with the look she was giving him. “I appreciate the support.”

“Any time, Harry,” she responded. She threw him a wink, then sashayed out the door. Harry watched her for half a moment before shaking his head to clear it.

Harry strode over to his friends who all gave him enquiring looks. He ignored them and asked, “So, what’d you think?”

They, in turn, all ignored his question. It was Ginny who asked the question on all of their minds. “So what did Miss Chang want?” There was a definite suggestive tone behind the inquiry.

Harry rolled his eyes at her and replied, “She just wanted to tell me that it was a good lesson.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Hermione joined in with a playfully derisive tone. “And she just had to wait for everyone else to leave the room before she could tell you this, did she?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “I’m the last person to ask if you want to know what’s going on in that girl’s head. I thought she was with Michael Corner now, anyway. So what are you lot on about?”

“Have we touched a nerve there, Harry?” Ginny questioned.

“Don’t be silly,” Harry waved his arm haphazardly. “Whatever there was between Cho and me is over and done with.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that, Harry. At least not for Cho, anyway. Didn’t you see the way she was swaying her hips as she walked away?” Hermione asked jeeringly.

“Whatever.” Harry refused to rise to their bait. He really didn’t have any feelings left for Cho, so their teasing didn’t have much effect on him. She was just another friend and HA member.

They seemed to realize this as well for they dropped the subject entirely, although that could also have been because of Luna’s next comment as well. “It’s good to see that you finally managed to fight off the Bluebellied Glazers that were damaging your vision, Harry. I imagine that’s why you don’t need glasses any more and why you were able to spot her hips swaying.” She said all of this very matter-of-factly while staring over Neville’s shoulder at something only she could apparently see.

Neville glanced at the others before replying with a simple “Oh.”

Ginny broke the silence that followed this pronouncement. “What say we all get out of here?” She led them over to the door.

Luna went her separate way to the Ravenclaw common room as the rest headed toward the portrait of the fat lady and the Gryffindor common room. As they walked through the halls, Harry spoke up. “Well I noticed your otter made another appearance toward the end of class Hermione. How were you two faring at the end of the lesson?” he asked of Neville and Ginny. “I don’t think I went by either of you toward the end.”

Ginny was the first to respond. “I’m still just getting mist. I’m not sure what the problem is, to be honest. I don’t think I’m doing anything wrong, but I just can’t get anything more than that.”

“Maybe you need to find a stronger thought or memory,” Harry supplied. “That really is the biggest key to the charm, stirring up a strong enough emotion to power the Patronus. I had a lot of trouble finding anything that would work until I tried using something that

wasn't a memory. You don't necessarily have to concentrate on a solely happy thought or memory either; any positive emotion can work if it is strong enough: happiness, hope, pride, relief, love..." he ticked each one off on his fingers. "Any of those can work in the right circumstances. We'll be doing a little more work on them Sunday. Try to come up with more thoughts and memories to use beforehand and see if they help. What about you Neville?"

"Oh, I'm in the same boat, I guess," he replied. "I'll try to come up with some better memories for Sunday."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry returned.

By the time breakfast was finished the next morning, Ron was back to his normal self, his anger at Harry completely forgotten. As they both had the morning off, they decided to retire up to the common room for a bout of wizard's chess. To no one's surprise, Harry was thoroughly trounced by Ron's chess prowess.

Harry's mind was not in the chess game, nor was it in any of his lessons that day. The entire day he could only think of the Occlumency lesson with Snape he'd be having that night after dinner. After lunch, he only had Transfiguration followed by three hours of free time. Since both Ron and Hermione had Herbology afterward, Harry had little trouble sneaking back up to the Room of Requirement for another training session.

He began the session as he always did, with the training dummies. He spent time dodging spells and fighting back, as normal. With an hour still left before dinner, though, Harry decided to try something a little different. He wanted to find some way to settle his nerves which had been on edge all day in anticipation of the Occlumency lesson that evening. So he asked the Room for a punching bag. Not an ordinary punching bag, mind you. No, this was a very specific punching bag. It was shaped like a human, male to be exact. The dummy was taller than Harry, probably about six feet tall. It was shrouded mostly in black and had a very distinct face with a hooked nose. Greasy, life-like hair sat on top of the dummies head. Yes,

beating the stuffing out of Snape was definitely one way to relieve some tension.

When he made his way to dinner, he was feeling much better than he had all day. He had a secretive smile on his face throughout the entire meal, thinking about the guilty pleasures he had just indulged in. He took the time at the dinner table to do some mental organization and preparation. Ron and Hermione didn't seem to notice as they were caught up in an argument about something or another. Harry didn't really pay much attention to what it was they were arguing over. He was sure it didn't really matter. He noticed that Ginny was giving him some pensive looks. She had probably noticed that he was quiet and withdrawn. He gave her a smile to let her know that he was okay.

He made sure to leave with plenty of time to make it to the dungeons by 6:00. The last thing he wanted to do was show up late on the first day. Snape had made it abundantly clear that tardiness would not be tolerated in these lessons at all. And he really needed Snape to test the strength of his mental barriers. Even after he had started studying Occlumency, he still experienced pains in his scar, and he still had that one vision and the occasional flash of Voldemort's emotions. He thought he was able to block Dumbledore's mental probing after the start of term feast, but it was hard to tell with his Headmaster. Tonight he would know once and for all whether or not any of his summer preparations had worked.

He knocked on the door to Snape's classroom at five minutes to six. There was no response. He knocked again, loudly, and rubbed his knuckles as he pulled his fist back. Perhaps he had knocked a little too forcefully. The skin looked a little raw, but he hadn't used enough force to break the skin, so he wasn't too concerned about it. There was still no response from inside the classroom, so Harry stood to the side of the door, leaning against the wall.

He glanced at his watch after a time. Four minutes had passed and still no sign of Snape. He wondered if it was possible that the Potion's Master had just forgotten about the lesson when he caught a glimpse of a figure approaching. Black robes billowing out behind him,

Professor Severus Snape strode purposefully down the corridor. He threw open the doors to the classroom and entered.

Harry wearily followed after his least favorite professor, already beginning to regret his decision to pursue these lessons with Snape. He quickly quashed those thoughts and reinforced his mental barriers. He did not want to be caught off guard. "Close the door," the man barked at him. Unaffected by the harshness or volume of his tone, Harry did as he was told.

Snape, as he had done the year prior, began siphoning thoughts from his head and inserting them into a pensieve. Guilt crept into the back of Harry's mind as he remembered the last time he had seen that pensieve in this classroom. He had witnessed the cruelty of his father towards Snape firsthand, and he didn't like it. It had been much too reminiscent of his own experiences with bullies for his liking. Harry had been putting up with bullies his entire life. Before he became a wizard, he went to school with Dudley and other kids from the neighborhood. Dudley and his gang had scared off anyone who might have considered befriending the scrawny, bespectacled boy that was Harry Potter. They had been intent on making that boy as miserable as possible. They humiliated, tormented, and abused him for their own entertainment time and time again.

Hogwarts had its fair share of bullies as well. The most notable one was, of course, Draco Malfoy. But where Dudley and his gang had been formidable enemies, Draco was not. Harry never stood a chance against his cousin and his gang. They were all bigger and stronger than he was, and he didn't have any means to fight back. But Draco was a different story. Really, Draco was just a spoiled brat whose bark was much worse than his bite. Draco could talk with the best of them, but he was often quick to back off from or avoid confrontations altogether. The only time he ever initiated a confrontation was when he was at a distinct advantage. Harry wasn't really worried about Malfoy. He was just a coward riding his daddy's coattails.

Harry was interrupted from his musings when Snape locked away the pensieve in a cabinet on the wall. Sneer in place, the Potions Master turned toward Harry and spat, "Clear your mind."

‘How utterly predictable,’ Harry thought to himself.

A moment later the professor had raised his wand and violently whispered, “Legilimens!”

Harry felt as if a battering ram had just smashed into his mind. When he had been blocking Dumbledore a week ago, the old man had barely been grazing the surface of his mind. The presence was hardly even felt by Harry. This was different, forceful, painful. But his shield held. Shock registered for only a moment on Snape’s face before his sneer snapped back into place. “It seems you have been practicing. Let’s see how your mind stacks up. Legilimens!”

Harry felt the battering ram again, only this time it didn’t relent after its initial attack. It backed up and crashed into his mental wall again and again and again. Harry held on for all he was worth, but he was unaccustomed to holding the shield in place in the face of an assault, let alone one of such viciousness. After a couple minutes of the hard fought battle he felt the walls in his mind start to crumble, and Snape emerged victorious. He was not, however, immediately granted the spoils of his conquest. Harry still had his trunks. Snape was given random, inconsequential memories and thoughts that began to float past his consciousness. He shunted them aside looking for more meaningful memories but found none.

Taking advantage of the man’s distraction, Harry pushed with all his mental might at the unwelcome guest in his mind. He felt the presence forcefully ejected from his mind and watched as Snape stumbled backwards. He backed up into his desk and ended up sitting on it with a muffled “Oomph.” While Snape was still trying to orient himself, Harry quickly began to rebuild the shattered wall in his mind. He was going to be ready for the man’s next assault.

“Impressive, Mr. Potter,” Snape congratulated emotionlessly as he stood up from his desk. “But not good enough, I’m afraid,” he continued in a growl. “If you cannot hold up against my assault, you’ll have no hope standing up to the Dark Lord. Take time every night to

reinforce the barriers in your mind. We shall meet again next week. You are dismissed.”

A bit taken aback at the prompt end to the lesson, Harry nodded dumbly and strode to the door. He opened it up and walked outside. As he shut the door behind himself, he glanced back into the room and saw Snape shakily slump into the chair behind his desk. His face lit up in a wide grin as the door clicked shut. It was definitely a good start.

The next morning after breakfast, Ron headed off to Divination while Hermione went to the library. Harry was headed toward the Room of Requirement to work with the training dummies, but a hand caught his shoulder as he deviated from the path to Gryffindor Tower. Spinning around to find the source, he came face to face with Dean Thomas.

Dean looked a little unsure of himself as he spoke up. “Hey Harry, can I ask you something?”

Harry looked at the boy carefully, wondering what it was that was on his mind. “Sure. Do we need to head somewhere more private or...?” he trailed off leaving the question open in the air.

Dean shrugged. “It’s not really necessary. Look, I wanted to ask you about Ron...” he trailed off seemingly unsure how to proceed.

“What is it?” Harry prompted. “Is something wrong with Ron?”

“I’m not sure,” Dean replied. “He’s been acting weird around me ever since we got back. At first I thought it was just my imagination, but now I’m not so sure. He seems fine around everyone else, but rarely ever speaks to me and when he does his tone completely changes, goes cold, scathing almost. Almost feels like I’m talking to Malfoy or something...Anyway, you wouldn’t happen to know what’s up with him, would you? Did I do something? Or say something?”

“Have you confronted him about it?” Harry asked, already having an idea of what the cause was but not wanting to have to explain it to

Dean. He didn't imagine Ginny would like that, and he didn't know how Dean would react.

"I tried to ask him if anything was wrong, but he just says everything's fine, then turns away," Dean said, waving his arms in the air exasperatingly.

Harry let out a low sigh before answering. "I think I might have an idea of what it could be. It's not anything that you did, and it's not anything Ron should be upset about. It's more of a misunderstanding than anything. I don't want to say anything until I can check a couple facts, so can I get back to you?"

Dean shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, I guess so. I don't mean to get you involved in anything. It's just getting bloody frustrating, especially since we sleep in the same room. I figured if anybody would know what was going on it would be you."

"Hey, no problem," Harry said with a smile. "I'll talk to you later, Dean."

As Dean headed back toward Gryffindor Tower, Harry continued his trek to the Room of Requirement. He didn't think Ginny could have forgotten to tell Ron the truth about her lack of a relationship with Dean, but he wanted to ask her about it to make sure. And he was not about to tell Dean about her fib without asking for her permission first. He struggled to remember what she had said her schedule looked like today. He knew she had mentioned it at breakfast that morning. He thought she said she had double DADA first thing in the morning, then a break before lunch. That gave him two hours to train before her class would let out.

Harry asked the room for his usual training room with the training dummies and after setting up various privacy wards, set to work. He went through periods of dodging without magical aid, full out dueling, and dueling with no shields. He left himself plenty of time to wash up and get to the DADA corridor to head Ginny off after her class ended. When he reached his destination, he had three minutes to spare before the bell.

He leaned up against the wall a little ways down the corridor and waited for the class to be let out. Soon enough the door to the classroom was opening, and the 5th year Gryffindors and Ravensclaws were streaming out of the brightly lit classroom. He caught Luna's eye as she passed and gave her a warm smile along with a nod of greeting.

He finally spotted the familiar mane of red hair belonging to one Ginny Weasley coming out of the classroom. She was one of the last ones out, conversing animatedly with Jack Sloper and one of the girls in her year. Harry thought her name might be Mandy but couldn't say for sure. As they were walking toward him, Ginny looked up and their eyes locked for a moment. A broad grin graced her lips and was accompanied a moment later by a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Professor Potter," she greeted. "How lovely to see you today. What brings you to this fine corridor?"

"You know," Harry mused thoughtfully, scratching his chin idly, "I could give you detention for mocking a professor."

"Well, Professor Potter," Ginny purred as she sidled up to Harry, "would I be serving that detention with you personally?" Ginny's female friend giggled girlishly as heat flooded Harry's face at the thinly veiled innuendo, giving him a blush to rival any Weasley's.

Harry gulped audibly as he took a moment to compose himself. When he responded it was in a brisk, business-like tone. "As a matter of fact, yes. If you would please follow me to my office, I will give you the details momentarily." He turned on his heel and, without a second glance back, strode purposefully to his office on the 5th floor. When he reached the door, he opened it up and waited outside in the hallway. A moment later Ginny rounded the corner and walked up to the door, shooting Harry a questioning glance which he studiously ignored. Without comment, he motioned her to precede him into the office with a wave of his hand.

Ginny stood in the middle of the room while Harry shut the door behind him, surreptitiously adding privacy wards with a wave of his hand, and sank into one of the arm chairs. Ginny followed suit, sitting in the seat opposite him. He maintained his stoic expression for a moment before breaking into a broad grin and letting out a hearty guffaw. "Well played. I must say I am impressed. I've been working hard on maintaining complete control over my emotions, but that comment caught me completely off guard."

"What can I say?" she asked, a wide smile lighting up her face. "It's a gift."

"Indeed," he replied seriously. "But all flirtations aside, there was a reason I was waiting for you in the corridor."

"Oh?" she purred suggestively, leaning forward in her chair.

"Stop that," he reprimanded with a grin.

"Sorry," she said unapologetically. "Go on. What did you need to talk to me about?"

"Well, it's about Dean actually," he started. "And Ron. Dean stopped me after breakfast this morning. He asked me if he had done anything to upset Ron because your brother has apparently been pretty cold to him lately."

"Oh no," Ginny groaned.

"Please tell me that you remembered to tell Ron the truth about you and Dean," Harry said pleadingly.

"Of course I remembered to tell him," she scolded distractedly. "I was just counting on Ron being reasonable about the whole situation once he found out the truth and dropping the animosity he had built up over the summer towards Dean. I obviously gave my brother too much credit."

“Well then the way I see it we have two problems to deal with,” Harry said logically. “How do we get Ron to quit being a prat? And what do we tell Dean?”

Ginny groaned as she slumped forward, putting her head in her hands.

“Okay, first things first: do you want me to talk to Ron for you?”

“No,” Ginny stated. “It’s my fault he’s being a prat. And he’s my brother. I should be the one to set him straight. I don’t want him taking any of his anger out on you.”

“Well, if you need any help with him, let me know,” he told her. “Now, what should I tell Dean. I already told him that I might know the cause and that it wasn’t anything he had done but was more of a misunderstanding on Ron’s part than anything else. I didn’t want to say any more than that without talking to you first.”

“Thanks, Harry,” she told him sincerely, reaching forward and lightly squeezing his knee. “It’s nice of you to look out for me, but I think we should tell him the truth. He’s got a right to know why my brother is being a prat to him. God, that’s going to be an embarrassing conversation.”

“I’ll talk to Dean and explain everything for you,” Harry offered. “You just worry about setting your brother straight.”

“No,” Ginny shook her head. “No, I should be the one to tell him. This is my mess, and you shouldn’t have to clean it up.” By the time she finished the statement, her head was bowed forward, buried in her hands.

“Ginny,” Harry said gently, reaching forward and tilting her face up to meet his gaze. “That’s what friends are for, right? Helping clean each other’s messes? You worry about Ron and let me talk to Dean.”

Ginny's eyes sparkled as she was caught in Harry's mesmerizing gaze. "Thank you, Harry. That really means a lot. I was not looking forward to that conversation...I don't even really know the bloke."

"It's nothing," he said warmly, finally removing his finger from her chin and leaning back in his seat. He turned his gaze to the fireplace, which sparked to life at that very moment. He sighed contentedly.

After several minutes Ginny broke the silence. "Harry?" she asked tentatively.

"Hmmm?" he answered distractedly.

"I hate to bring this up right now, what with you just agreeing to help me with the whole Ron/Dean situation..." she began hesitantly.

Harry turned his full attention back to the red-haired young woman sitting opposite him. "Ginny, don't ever hesitate to ask me for anything. If you need something, then just ask away," he told her warmly, then added as an afterthought, "The worst thing that can happen is I say no."

"Well, I've just been thinking," she stated, "and I know that you're really busy and all, what with your regular classes and the HA and Quidditch and everything, but I was wondering if you could help me with something, a little project I'd like to start working on."

"I'd be glad to help you Ginny," Harry stated honestly and unhesitantly. "Just tell me what you need."

She smiled warmly at him as she continued. "Well I really want to become an animagus. And I was hoping that maybe you could help teach me. I can do any necessary reading on my own, I was just hoping that maybe you can help me out with the transformation. I know you're busy, so I don't expect you to put a lot of time into it, but if you could maybe meet with me an hour or two a week, I would really appreciate it."

“I think it’s a great idea,” Harry responded genuinely. “Of course I’ll help you out, as best I can anyway. I don’t think I really managed the transformation by conventional means, but I might be able to help you along.”

“Oh, Harry, thank you,” Ginny all but squealed as she launched herself out of her chair into Harry’s lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Harry laughed as he caught her around the waist. “Now, Miss Weasley,” he began in a formal tone, “do you thank all your teachers this way? I’m not quite sure it passes as acceptable behavior for a student/teacher relationship.”

Ginny swatted his arm playfully. “Don’t be a prat, Harry.” She let herself slip out of his lap and back onto solid ground.

“To start your training, we’ll need to brew the animagus potion. I don’t have all the ingredients needed, as I asked you for exactly what I needed over the summer, and nothing more. I’ll need to stop by Diagon Alley to pick them up, perhaps this weekend.”

“Harry, you can’t just go to Diagon Alley,” Ginny protested, turning swiftly towards where he was still seated in the armchair.

“And just why not?” Harry asked, amused at her reaction.

“What if you got caught? You could be expelled for something like that. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if you got in trouble because of me,” she scolded hotly.

“Don’t be silly,” he stated, earning him a sharp glare from the hot-tempered girl. “First of all, I won’t be caught. Secondly, Dumbledore wouldn’t dare turn me out even if he did find out. I’d be in for the lecture of a lifetime, sure, and he’d be keeping a much closer eye on me than he has been, but there is no way he’d even consider kicking me out.”

“How can you be so sure?” she asked him.

“Just trust me on this one. Dumbledore would do everything in his power to keep me here, to keep me under his thumb and locked up as securely as possible, if he had his way. That’s why he doesn’t know about any of my summer-time discoveries and adventures. As long as he doesn’t suspect that I’m capable of going out on my own, he won’t keep close enough watch on me to actually prevent me from doing so. I think that’s why he offered me the assistant professorship, to try to keep me busy and satisfied here, to distract me from what’s going on outside. He thinks that as long as I have something to focus on, I’ll leave the war in his hands until he deems me ready.”

“Harry?” Ginny asked uncertainly. “What do you mean?”

“Hmm?” he said distractedly. “Oh, nothing, just going off on a tangent. Basically he thinks that I’ll be content to sit on the sidelines and watch the war play out, but he’s got another thing coming. I’ll play the good little boy for now, to keep him off my back until I’m ready. I managed to get quite a lot done this summer without anyone noticing, and I left the house nearly every day if for nothing else than to get some exercise as an animagus.”

“So that’s why you were always telling us not to feel bad for you, that this summer was so much better than usual. Here we were cooped up in the house feeling sorry for you because you were stuck with the muggles with absolutely nothing to do; all the while you were out gallivanting around Diagon Alley and running around as a panther,” she exclaimed in a mixture of mirth and indignation.

“I did tell you not to feel bad for me,” Harry said around a smug smile. “It’s not my fault nobody listened.”

“Nobody listened because we all just assumed you were stuck in the house with your relatives all day every day. When you weren’t begging us to get you out of there, we assumed that it was because you didn’t want to face us, that you were still feeling guilty about what happened in June. Imagine our surprise when you showed up at King’s Cross with long hair, no glasses, a physique that is already

driving the female population of this castle crazy, and instead of being all gloomy, you laugh and smile and joke around.”

“But I sent out letters saying I was doing much better...” Harry began.

“I know what you said in your letters,” Ginny interrupted him, standing from her seat. “But it would be just like you to say ‘I’m fine’ when you’re dying, emotionally or physically.” His only response was a grin and a nod. “See? We didn’t know what to think. I thought that you’d be okay, but I never expected this.” She gesticulated wildly in his direction with her hands before falling back into her chair with an “oomph.”

“Got that out of your system now?” he asked with unabashed amusement.

She glared at him, but the effect was ruined as a smile tugged at her lips. “For now, anyway.”

He let loose a mild chuckle before continuing. “Good. Now as I was saying earlier, I’ll need to run over to Diagon Alley for a quick run to the apothecary this weekend. I think it opens at 8:00, so maybe I’ll go during breakfast tomorrow. We’ll need to come up with a cover story to tell people if they ask me where I was at breakfast.”

“But Harry, how will you get off the grounds to disappear?” Ginny asked him.

Harry cocked an eyebrow at her and grinned roguishly. “I have my ways.”

She rolled her eyes at him and said, “So what will we tell anyone who asks where you were?”

“Hmmm,” he wondered as he tapped his foot on the hearthrug in front of the fire. “How about this? We push it back to Sunday morning. I need you to come to breakfast with me first thing in the morning, so you’re there before everyone else. I’ll eat a quick breakfast and tell

you that I'll be in my office to finish preparations for the day's classes. Anyone who is there will have seen me and possibly heard me. And you can say that I stopped by but went up to my office to get some work done. I'll bring my invisibility cloak with me, so I can sneak in and out and back into my office without anyone being any the wiser."

"Sounds like you've got it covered," she told him.

Harry managed to grab Dean after dinner and led him into an unused classroom. Dean sat on one of the desktops as Harry paced in front of him. "Okay, I'm pretty sure I know why Ron's acting the way he is." Harry launched into an explanation of how Ginny had told Ron that they were dating just to get a rise out of him and went on to describe Ron's overprotective brother routine last year with Michael Corner and how unreasonable he had been over the summer as well. He told Dean that he had talked to Ginny about it today and that she was confronting Ron about it, so hopefully Ron would quit being a prat for no good reason.

Dean had sat quietly throughout the whole story, brow furrowed. When Harry finally finished talking and looked at him expectantly, Dean finally spoke. "Well, I guess that explains it then," he said simply. "I wish someone had told me about it beforehand, though."

"Well, we didn't expect Ron to hold a grudge against you after he found out the truth," Harry explained.

"Oh it's not that. That's not a big deal, really." Here Dean grinned wolfishly at him. "I just wish Ginny had told me beforehand. I mean, if her brother was gonna be mad at me anyway, I could have at least enjoyed some of the benefits of it, eh mate?"

Harry didn't know whether to laugh because Dean was taking it so well or knock him upside the head for the insinuation. In the end he chose neither. "Well it's over now anyway," he said at length. "Ginny oughta be able to set Ron straight pretty quickly. Believe me, she is one girl you do not want to get on the bad side of."

"You speaking from experience, mate?"

“Mostly second-hand experience, thankfully,” Harry admitted. Dean had laughed at that.

“Well, thanks for explaining everything, I guess,” Dean said. “I think I’ll head back up to the common room now.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry agreed.

When they reached the fat lady’s portrait and entered through the opening, Harry scanned the crowd of Gryffindors for the trademark Weasley red hair. He spotted Ginny at a table with a few girls from her year with several books opened in front of them. She glanced up as he and Dean walked in with a questioning look on her face. He gave her a thumbs up to let her know it went alright. She awarded him a smile in reply and mouthed the words “thank you.”

Sunday morning came soon enough, and Ginny found herself walking through the halls towards the Room of Requirement. They had agreed the night before that she would meet Harry there after his workout, then proceed down to the Great Hall together. Harry would eat quickly and head over to his office. He would open the door, walk in, throw on his invisibility cloak, walk back out right away and shut the door.

Ginny was early. She had agreed to meet Harry at ten to 8:00, but she was ready at 7:30 and decided to just head over early. She wasn’t exactly sure what to expect when she got there. Harry had mentioned that after his morning jog, he would go to the Room of Requirement to work out, but she had no idea what this entailed. When she reached the correct hallway, she found that a door was already in place across from the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy, so she quietly let herself in.

The room was somewhat large and was filled with racks holding weights scattered throughout. There were various contraptions in one section that she was completely unfamiliar with. Another section was relatively open and covered with a cushioned mat. Ginny absently

walked toward the workout machines, though she had no idea what they were for, and continued to observe her surroundings.

As she walked further into the room she could make out someone's heavy breathing. She weaved her way through the machines to find the source. When she finally found him, her breath caught and she had to grab hold of a nearby machine to steady herself. Hanging on a bar attached to the wall, shirtless, was Harry Potter. She slowly sank down onto the seat of the machine she was clutching and observed him unobtrusively.

She watched as he hung there for a minute, motionless, with sweat dripping down his face and exposed torso. His hair was tied back behind his head to keep it out of his face, but a few wisps had escaped and were sticking to the sweat on his cheeks. He adopted a look of concentration as he resumed his workout, completely unaware of the audience.

Ginny watched, mesmerized, as the muscles in Harry's arms and chest contracted as he pulled himself up until his chin rose above the bar. He slowly lowered himself down, muscles rippling all the way. As soon as his arms were completely extended, he grunted as he exploded upwards again, chin rising above the bar. He slowly lowered himself yet again, and Ginny was hypnotized. She found she could not move, nor could she calm her pounding heart. She may have given up on her crush on the boy Harry Potter, but she could not deny her attraction to the man in front of her.

Only this time it had nothing to do with him being Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, nor did it have anything to do with how noble and brave he had been, nor how selfless he was. It had nothing to do with who Harry Potter was deep down inside that had captured her attention in the past. All of those things attracted her to Harry despite his appearance. That's not to say Harry was unattractive before. His eyes had always been breathtaking, and he had always been kind of cute, but this was different. This was not cute; this was sexy. He no longer had his boyish good looks. This was a man, pure and simple, and about as fine a specimen as she had ever seen.

There wasn't an ounce of fat on his body that she could see. And given the view that she was getting right now, that was actually saying something. Even from the distance she was at, she could pick out various muscles on him. His abs were well defined, giving him a nice six pack. His chest was sculpted perfectly. As he slowly lowered himself down again, she could see his biceps and triceps bulging on his arms. As she continued to watch him, she unconsciously licked her suddenly dry lips.

And then he dropped from the bar and fell the couple feet over which he had been suspended. He grabbed his shirt from the ground nearby and proceeded to wipe the sweat off his face and neck with it. As he finished wiping himself down, he finally looked up and noticed that he was no longer alone. A blush started to form, and she was secretly thrilled to find that it was not confined to his face. Even so, she could feel the heat in her own face and knew that she was probably even redder than he.

He nervously crossed his arms across his chest and glanced down at his own naked torso. He looked back up at her, and a silence descended upon them. After about a minute spent just looking at each other, Ginny finally came to some of her senses and spoke up. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt or anything. I was running early, so I decided to just come right over rather than waiting around. When I came in here I just got curious and started walking around." She said all of this rather quickly.

"It's alright," he told her honestly. "I was just surprised to see you there is all. I didn't hear you come in, and I'm not used to company when I'm here."

"Oh," she stated glumly. "Well, I can wait outside if you'd prefer." She started backing away from him back toward the exit.

"No!" he exclaimed a little louder than necessary. "No, it's fine, really. I was just finishing anyway. Let me just take a quick shower, and I'll meet you back out here in a bit."

"Shower?" she wondered aloud.

“This is the Room of Requirement, you know?” he asked her as he pointed to a door that had just appeared on a side wall. “I won’t be long.”

She nodded absently and watched as he walked through the newly formed door. She sank down onto the cushioned seat of the machine she was standing next to and let her mind wander. An image of Harry, shirtless, doing chin-ups kept flashing through her mind. It was a tough mental image to shake. She had known that he had changed a lot over the summer and had already figured that he was much more muscular than the previous year based on how his new wardrobe fit him. But it was entirely different to actually see his muscular form in action. Once the female population realized just what he was hiding under those bulky robes, there wouldn’t be a single woman left who was not fawning over Harry Potter.

She was glad that she had worked so hard to get over her nervousness around Harry; otherwise, she would probably be a puddle at his feet right now. Even with all the work she had put in, she had still been embarrassed and nervous beyond belief when he had noticed her watching him. But what could he expect? He had completely caught her off guard. Now that she knew what to expect, she was sure she would be able to handle herself in the future.

It did throw quite a gear into her mind’s inner workings though. Harry continued to surprise her this year, and she wasn’t quite sure what to make of him. Over the last year she had thought she was finally moving past Harry. She had dated Michael Corner for almost the whole of her fourth year, not that it was ever anything terribly serious, but she had finally let go of all her girlish fantasies about Harry. She had never really stopped caring about Harry, only dropped the hopeless adoration and hero-worship.

But she wasn’t entirely sure where that left her and what her feelings for Harry were now. There was definitely some attraction there; there was no use even trying to deny that. Any girl who could see what she just saw and claim otherwise was lying through her teeth. He was gorgeous. But she had always felt some attraction for him physically. His eyes had always been his most attractive feature for her, and

those definitely had not changed. Now there was so much more though.

But what about beyond physical attraction? It was easy to forget about her feelings for Harry last year because he had been such a moody and annoying prat. She still cared for him despite his attitude, but it wasn't difficult to think of other boys or even to date another boy with Harry being so glum. But this year he was different. This year he was in control. It was such a big change that she could hardly believe he was the same person. Last year he had been lost and completely without direction. His emotions often got the better of him, and he was spinning wildly out of control. Now he had reined his emotions in. He was playful, happy...flirtatious even, which she still had trouble believing.

He still had a serious side, but he seemed to know that there was a time and place for it. He still embarrassed somewhat easily as well, yet he no longer allowed the feeling to immobilize him. He recovered himself quickly and managed to keep his dignity in tact. He had learned to control his temper as well. He no longer lashed out without thinking but kept a cool head and dealt with gits like Malfoy coolly.

There was plenty there to draw any girl in, but she just wasn't sure. She knew that she loved him as a friend. That was a certainty. But after falling in love with the Boy-Who-Lived image in the past, she was not going to cast her lot in without really getting to know him first. She would be his friend, she resolved. And the future would speak for itself.

About ten minutes after he disappeared, Harry walked back into the workout room clean, refreshed, and fully dressed. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said to Ginny.

"Oh, it's no problem," she replied easily. "Like I said, I was the one who was early. You ready to head down to the Great Hall now?"

"Yeah, let's get going."

And so they walked through the still empty hallways and down the staircases leading to the Great Hall. They did not run into a single person on their trek as there were still 5 minutes until breakfast would begin being served. Nobody was ever down to breakfast early on a Sunday except Harry. He had been there for the start of the meal last week as well. It made sense since he was up so early to jog and work out. Breakfast was extended on the weekends for those who wished to sleep in, and he did not much feel like waiting for everyone else to finally wake up so that he could eat.

They entered the Great Hall to find all the house tables empty. Professors McGonagall and Snape were the only two other people present in the hall and were sitting up at their usual seats at the head table. The two Gryffindors sat next to each other at their house's table ignoring the questioning glances their head of house was shooting them. They chatted amicably for several minutes before food began appearing on the table. Harry tucked into his breakfast with fervor, while Ginny just casually munched on various foods as she carried the conversation. She had all the time in the world, after all, while Harry was in a bit of a rush to get to Diagon Alley and back before his class began at 10:00.

By the time Harry was finishing up his meal, several students had filtered in to the Great Hall and migrated to their respective house tables. A few Gryffindors had joined them a little ways down the table, while the rest of the early risers seemed to be split pretty evenly between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The Slytherin table was still empty.

Harry announced his departure loud enough for the Gryffindors further along the table to hear but not so loud as to seem abnormal. He told Ginny he would see her later and strode out of the hall. He walked decisively to his office on the fifth floor, opened the door, and stepped inside. Without closing the door, he ducked into a corner of the room and donned his invisibility cloak. Once completely covered, he exited the room and shut the door with a wave of his hand.

He made his way up to the top of the West Tower to the owlery. He decided the best way to get off of the grounds would be to fly away as an owl. He made sure there was nobody around when he arrived,

then made the transformation. He rose into the rafters and spotted his snowy white companion. He greeted Hedwig and explained that he was off to run an errand in Diagon Alley. When she offered to fly with him, he told her that he wouldn't be flying the whole way, just far enough off the grounds to change back into human form before apparating the rest of the way.

So Harry set off. He flew through one of the windows set high atop the tower and soared off into the open sky. There were scattered clouds this morning that were currently hiding the sun, but they were not enough to put a damper on the beautiful day. There was still bright blue sky to behold, and there was hardly anything in the world that could take away from the joy of flying. Harry soared on the air currents, letting them carry him out above the lake. He circled a bit, occasionally beating his wings to correct his flight, and thoroughly enjoying the freedom flying always offered.

After a couple minutes playing above the lake, he resumed his course to the outskirts of Hogsmeade, where he used to apparate during the summer when he wanted to play in his animagus forms. When he reached a secluded enough spot, he reverted back to human form still covered in his invisibility cloak. It was nifty how anything you were wearing would change with you when you transformed. He shrugged out of the cloak and quickly stored it in his trunk which he kept in a pocket on his person at all times.

He needed to change his appearance before he could head into Diagon Alley, so he changed his hair color to the light brown color he had used over the summer. He shortened his hair considerably, leaving it so short that his hair couldn't even act up on him. He applied a glamour charm to the scar on his forehead as a finishing touch. He conjured a mirror to check his appearance and found that he looked nothing like his usual self, except his eyes. He almost forgot to change his contacts. He quickly made the switch and found brown eyes now staring back at him in the mirror.

Satisfied, Harry vanished the mirror, placed his trunk back in his pocket, and apparated to Diagon Alley. He found the street relatively deserted with just a few shoppers moving between stores. Paying them little heed, Harry started towards the apothecary. It didn't take

him long to find everything he needed, and ten minutes after walking into the store, he exited with the ingredients stored in his trunk.

He still had plenty of time before he needed to be back at Hogwarts, so he decided to walk around a little. As he walked past Gringotts, he noticed a horridly brightly painted shop in green and pink on his left hand side. As he walked closer he realized with a start that today was September the 14th, making tomorrow the grand opening of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Before he even saw the sign he knew what store he was looking at. No one other than Fred and George would ever paint a shop such flashy colors.

He walked by the shop and glanced in the windows as he passed. He saw Fred and George hard at work, stocking shelves and setting up displays. They must be preparing for the opening tomorrow. He was tempted to watch them for longer but really didn't want to call attention to himself, so he decided to continue walking for a bit. When he reached the end of the alley, he decided it was probably time to start heading back.

He apparated back to the spot he had left from, returned his appearance to normal, and changed into an owl in less than a minute. He took the time to really enjoy his flight this time around, knowing that he had the time to spare. After flying about the school grounds for about 10 minutes he was joined by Hedwig. The pair could be seen flying in tandem, circling each other, chasing each other, and flying in synchronized patterns.

Harry was having the time of his life, flying with his most loyal and stable friend of the past six years. Hedwig had been with Harry through everything since he had been introduced to the wizarding world. Even when he was stuck with the Dursleys, she was always there with him. And she was there throughout his transformation this summer, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. She probably knew more of his secrets than anybody else, Sirius included. Even before he learned to converse with her, he had always talked to his owl. He had always felt like she understood him somehow. When he learned to talk with her, he wasn't so much shocked that she

understood everything he said but more of the fact that she was able to converse in her own way. He had never suspected that.

After flying about with Hedwig for 20 minutes, Harry decided that it was time to head back to his office. He did have classes to prepare for, after all. He and Hedwig flew together into the owlery. Hedwig perched on one of the rafters while Harry soared gracefully to the ground. He scanned the room carefully during his descent for anyone but found the place to be empty. So when he landed, he reverted back to human form and threw on his invisibility cloak yet again.

He carefully made his way back to his office. The halls were busier than they were in the morning, so he was forced to move slowly so as not to make any noise or bump into anyone. As he approached the corridor that housed his office, he heard some familiar voices up ahead of him.

“I don’t care if he wants to be left alone. He needs to know about this. Owls don’t normally fly together like that. It’s got to be some sort of mating ritual, and if Hedwig is going to be a mother soon, Harry should know about it,” Hermione huffed. Harry had to struggle not to burst out in a fit of laughter. It was bad enough when Ginny had written suggesting the two owls might be a little more than friendly, but for his friends to think that he had just performed a mating ritual with Hedwig...it was just too much.

After calming himself down some, he sped up and caught sight of Ron’s lanky form just as he was rounding the corner. They were about to reach his office door. Ginny’s reply echoed back to him. “I agree that he should know about it, but I don’t see why you need to do it right now. He told me that he was preparing for his classes and didn’t want to be disturbed unless it was urgent. I would hardly call this urgent. Besides, I already mentioned that he should watch out for this. Hedwig made friends with him sometime over the summer according to Harry.”

“Harry already knows about this owl?” Hermione paused and asked.

“Yes,” Ginny cried out. “I’ve been trying to explain that to you for the last five minutes, but you wouldn’t listen to me. He told me that the owl often visited when he was staying with his relatives.”

“But how can you be sure it’s the same owl?” Ron interjected. “Maybe that was some other owl that Hedwig made friends with.”

“I know because I met the owl that Harry was talking about,” Ginny replied shortly.

“When?” both Hermione and Ron asked simultaneously.

“When Harry sent me Em, he had the other owl carry all the supplies to go with her,” she explained.

As they continued talking Harry slipped past them to his office door. With a wave of his hand, he caused a suit of armor behind the trio to levitate just an inch off the ground and clang back down. When everyone looked to see what made the noise, Harry opened the door to his office, stepped in, threw off his cloak, stepped back out and shut the door behind him. “What’s with all the racket out here?” he asked his friends.

“Hey Harry,” Ginny greeted brightly. “How are the lesson plans coming along?”

“Just fine until you lot showed up making all that noise,” Harry mock scowled.

“Now wait just a minute,” Hermione started to counter.

“Lighten up Hermione,” Harry said with a smile. “I was just playing with you. So what brings you guys to my neck of the woods?”

“Well, we just caught Hedwig and a black owl doing what we think might be some kind of mating ritual over the grounds. We just thought you should know just in case. That way you don’t one day end up with a baby owl out of the blue,” Hermione explained to him.

He smiled brightly in return, still struggling to control his mirth. "I see. Those two did seem rather friendly over the summer, but I never thought it had anything to do with mating. What makes you think they were doing some sort of mating ritual?"

Hermione's voice changed to what Harry called lecture mode. She often adopted this tone of voice when she was reciting an answer from a book or explaining something to somebody. "Well first of all, they were out flying together for pleasure during the day. Normally owls only fly for pleasure at night because they are nocturnal by nature. Secondly, I've never seen owls fly as coordinated as they were. It's like they were dancing together or something. It was a beautiful sight to watch. Half of the girls in Gryffindor Tower were glued to the windows watching them fly together."

"You don't say," Harry stated, honestly surprised that so many people had been watching them fly. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll have to keep an eye on her. But for now I should get back to work. I need to finalize my preparations for the classes today. Don't forget to wear something that will allow you some flexibility. We're starting some new drills today."

"What are we gonna be doing?" Ron asked.

"I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise," Harry said with a smile. "You'll find out soon enough. Just don't wear anything bulky like your school robes and you'll be fine. Spread the word around if you see any body else. I'm not sure if they will all remember."

"Consider it done," Ginny supplied as she grabbed the arms of Ron and Hermione to turn them around. "We'll see you at lunch, Harry."

"Yeah, see you mate," Ron called out.

Harry gave them all a big wave. As they began walking the other way, Ginny glanced at him over her shoulder, one eyebrow cocked. He gave her a smile and a wink. Ginny gave him a grin and another little wave just before they turned the corner and were out of sight.

It wasn't long afterwards that Harry found himself in the Room of Requirement standing in front of a large group of students instructing them on the mechanics of shielding spells. Most of his lesson with the beginners was spent perfecting protego. They also got some work done on petrificus totalus.

Lunch was a hurried affair for Harry. After his first lesson let out, he ran down to the Great Hall, scarfed down a quick lunch, and hurried back to the Room of Requirement to get it set up for his next class. He needed the room to be different than what he usually used, so he wanted the extra time to ensure that everything was set up correctly. After pacing back and forth three times in the correct spot imagining what he needed, Harry opened the door that appeared for him.

The first thing he noticed was the size of the room. It was large, much larger than their usual room, and rivaling the size of the Great Hall. There was a small stage in the front of the room for him to instruct from. On the ground over a dozen large circles were marked off across the room. Each circle looked to be a good fifteen to twenty meters in diameter. At the center of each of these large circles, a smaller circle was marked off that looked to be about a meter in diameter.

He went to each circle and cast a spell over it. The spell was a type of ward that was used often in dueling tournaments. Its purpose was to absorb any spells that impacted its barriers. Harry was using a weak version of the spell, as no strong spells were going to be cast by his students in their drills.

He paced around on the small stage for a while going over the lesson in his head. He reviewed what it was he was going to have them do and how he was going to implement it. Eventually students began filing into the room. When the clock struck 1:00, Harry shut and warded the doors with a wave of his wand. He pulled out the magical contract that everyone had signed and murmured "Show me non-members." Nothing happened. Satisfied, Harry tucked the contract back in his robes and called for everyone's attention. The whole room immediately quieted down and gave him their attention.

“Thank you. We will start the class off by working on the Patronus Charm some more. This will be the last time we cover it in this class. It is, however, very important that you all learn to cast this spell competently. If anyone continues to have trouble with it after today, you can always feel free to come talk to me about it outside of class.” Harry demonstrated the proper wand movements and incantation to the class again to remind them all. “Now, I want you all to find your positive thoughts and memories to focus on and give it a shot. If you found that you couldn’t quite get your Patronus to take form last class, you may want to try looking for a stronger thought or memory. The spell requires strong positive emotions to power it, so finding the right focus is pivotal. You may begin.”

Several students set to work almost immediately. The ones who were able to conjure a corporeal Patronus the last time were among this leading group, along with a couple other students. Harry noticed that among these other students were Ginny and Neville, whom Harry had spoken to after the last class. He had encouraged them both to try to think of something else to focus for this next attempt and was interested to see the results.

Neville was the first of the two to attempt the spell. He created a strong curtain of vapor that seemed to become dense in certain areas as if it was trying to form a shape but couldn’t quite manage it. Harry gave him an encouraging smile and glanced over at Ginny. She bore a mask of concentration on her face as she shouted out the words “Expecto patronum!”

A sleek silvery form emerged from her wand in a rush and circled her protectively. He moved closer to investigate the animal. It had four legs and a long tail. It moved gracefully like a cat. Ginny was beaming widely at her Patronus. She looked up and their eyes locked for a moment. A look of sudden realization appeared on her face for a moment as their eyes held each other. She suddenly looked away and a blush crept up her neck into her face. She refocused onto her Patronus and gave the mist a pat. Her hand went right through the form as it sat in front of her and it faded out of existence.

Hermione was next to Ginny and looked positively delighted for her friend. “Ginny!” she squealed, which was a new one for Harry

because Hermione did not squeal ever; that was saved for other more girly girls. "It was gorgeous. It was some kind of cat wasn't it?" Ginny only nodded in response, still blushing. "What kind of cat do you think it was? It was pretty big" Hermione mused. "It could have been a lioness or a lynx...a tiger perhaps, maybe a..." she gasped suddenly and drew a hand to her mouth. "I know what it was," she proclaimed with a knowing smirk.

"Hermione..." Ginny warned, but Hermione paid her no heed.

"What was it you said your mysterious savior was again? Oh yes, I remember now: a panther," Hermione was clearly enjoying this. Harry's mouth opened a little in shock at this revelation. If Ginny's form was a panther, then there was a pretty good chance that he could guess what memories she was using to power her Patronus. And it was somewhat flattering, if he was honest with himself.

Hermione, in the mean time, was continuing her torture of Ginny. "It makes sense really, after all you told me about him."

"Hermione...you better stop it right now," Ginny insisted, the threat in her voice blatant.

But again, Hermione ignored her and continued to torment her friend. "What was it that you said about him? How handsome and strong he was and how you felt so safe in his arms?" Harry grinned at this. Talk about your ultimate blackmail material.

Ginny, apparently, had had enough of this. "So, Hermione," she called out loudly despite the fact that her friend was right next to her, "hear back from Viktor Krum yet? You did say you wrote to him recently, didn't you?"

This did the trick. Hermione's grin quickly evaporated. "What's this about Vicky?" a voice asked loudly. Hermione's shoulders tensed noticeably. She glared at Ginny who returned the look and stuck her tongue out at Hermione. Hermione turned around to face Ron, so Harry took his opportunity to approach Ginny.

“Quite a nice looking Patronus you had there,” Harry commended her airily. “Beautiful creature, if I do say so myself. Never have I seen anything move with such grace and power.”

“Oh shove off, Potter,” Ginny returned, shoving Harry’s shoulder.

“No need to get offended, Gin,” Harry calmly replied. “I was merely complimenting you. You did well. Conjuring a Patronus is an extremely difficult bit of magic. You should be proud of yourself and your Patronus.”

“Don’t even start with me Harry; I’m not in the mood.” And Harry could tell she was dead serious. He decided he should drop it before she opted to retaliate as she had done with Hermione. He dropped his teasing grin and looked at her seriously.

“I do mean it, though, Gin. Good job on your Patronus. I knew you could do it.”

She searched his eyes for any insincerity for a long moment. She must have been pleased with what she found, for she smiled suddenly and thanked him. Harry returned her grin and moved on to help out others who were having difficulty. He reprimanded Ron and Hermione for fighting when they should be working. He encouraged Neville to keep up the practice and that he would have it down in no time. And he made the rounds through the class. After a while, he decided that it was time to move on.

He strode to the small stage in the front of the room and hopped up onto it. A whistle appeared on the podium as he thought of his need for it. Harry grabbed it and blew. A high pitched noise echoed throughout the cavernous room and silence descended. All attention was now focused on Harry.

“Good work, all of you. That’s an exceptionally difficult spell to master. Those of you who managed a corporeal Patronus should be extremely proud of yourselves. Most of the average adult witches and wizards never progress that far with it. I encourage all of you to continue practicing the charm on your own, even those that did

manage a corporeal Patronus. With the dementors on Voldemort's side," –the room flinched noticeably, but Harry pressed on –"it is only a matter of time before they start using them in their attacks. You will find it extremely difficult to cast a Patronus in front of dementors, much more difficult than conjuring one here in this room. It will take all of your focus to block out the effects of the dementors enough to concentrate on something positive, so it is important that you are ready should the time come."

"Now it's time for us to move on to the next part of today's lesson. This is going to be a very different type of lesson for all of you. I asked you all to come wearing something that you would feel comfortable moving around in, and I see that not everybody heeded my advice. I have little doubt that you will be regretting that decision shortly." The students all glanced at each other nervously, wondering what Harry had in store for them.

"You will notice that there are numerous circles marked off around the room," Harry pointed out. The students began looking around them, and it was clear that many of them had not in fact noticed this detail. "The next part of the lesson will be spent working on dodging. Death Eaters use many spells that cannot be blocked by conventional shields, and three that cannot be blocked by any shields. It is important that you all learn how to avoid being hit by these spells in the first place."

The students looked very worried at this, many wondering what it was they were going to be dodging. Others, like Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown seemed disgusted at the thought of doing any physical activity. "You will each pair up with another student. One student will stand in the small circle in the middle of the big circle. That person will be the caster. The other person will be the dodger. The dodger will be required to stay within the confines of the large circle.

"The caster will be shooting a mild stinging hex at the dodger. You should all know the spell, but in case you don't, the incantation is morsus." He demonstrated the wand movement to go with it. "The dodger is not to use any magic at all. You are expected to treat these

spells as if they were Unforgivables coming at you. Ever since I was introduced to the wizarding world, the Unforgivables have been presented as an unblockable, unstoppable force. When you've got green light coming at you, you're dead. There is no defense against them...blah blah blah. Well I'm here to tell you that's a load of crap. You see green light coming at you, move out of the way. There's your defense.

"I expect everybody to take this drill seriously. You could one day end up in a life or death situation and these skills could mean the difference. Anyone who I catch casting spells half heartedly or that I suspect is not trying to hit their target will be forced to dodge my own stinging hexes as punishment. I can guarantee that you won't like it. We will work in five minute intervals. One partner will dodge for five minutes while the other casts. I will call time, then you will switch. Now everyone partner up."

Unsurprisingly, friends sought each other out for this drill. Most people ended up pairing with someone from their own house. Blaise and Daphne paired up, as did Ron and Hermione. The only noticeable exceptions to this rule were Ginny and Luna who had decided to work together despite their house differences. Once everyone seemed to have a partner, Harry spoke up again.

"Alright. Does everybody have a partner?" Nobody fessed up to being partnerless, so Harry continued. "Good. I need all of you to spread out and each group occupy one circle. Decide amongst yourselves who will start as the caster and who will dodge first."

There was a lot of shuffling around as they all moved to claim a circle. There was minimal strife in this process as each circle was identical to the next. When everyone seemed to be settled, Harry spoke again. "Now I want you all to try to cast the stinging hex at someone in another circle."

The class all looked at each other as if he was crazy. Ginny, not one to pass up an excellent opportunity, cast a stinging hex towards Ron. She was shocked when the hex impacted an invisible barrier not far

in front of her. Several other people tried this as well and received similar results. "You have no doubt found that the spell cannot travel outside the boundaries of your circle, so you will have no need to fear getting hit from stray hexes from another group. Now does anybody have any questions?"

Hermione's hand shot up in the air. "Yes, Hermione?"

"What are we supposed to do about the stinging hexes we are hit with?" she asked.

"An excellent question. I forgot to address that. After each round, you can cure the stinging with a simple finite incantatem. The hex is so mild that it does not have any lingering effects after it is lifted. Any other questions?"

Nobody spoke up. "Good. Dodgers, hand over your wands to your partners. Casters, you are to remain in the small circle for the duration of the exercise. Dodgers, you're confined to the larger circle. Everybody get ready." One person in each group shuffled to the small circle. Once everyone had finished moving, Harry called out "Begin."

After a minute, frustration bubbled up in Harry's veins. This was not going at all like he had hoped. The people casting spells were all doing so half-heartedly, and those dodging hardly had to move at all to avoid being hit. No one was really trying to hit anyone else, and the speed with which people were casting was pathetic.

Harry blew hard on his whistle and yelled "Enough!" The entire class looked over to find their instructor fuming at them. Those that were near Harry took a conscious step away from him. "That was pathetic. Do you call that spell casting? Do you actually expect to hit anybody casting spells like that? It's obvious that you all are going to need a demonstration of how this should work. I need a volunteer to do this exercise with me. We will each take a turn dodging so that I can demonstrate both casting and dodging, since you all seem incapable of doing both. Is anyone willing to help me with this demonstration?"

For a full minute nobody moved. Then, to his surprise, Blaise stepped forward. "Yeah, Potter, I'll help you out."

Harry gave the man a slight smile and a nod. "Alright, thank you Blaise. Good to see someone here has a little backbone. I'll do the casting first, that way you won't be shy about returning the favor."

"I don't think you have to worry about me being shy hexing you," Blaise replied seriously.

Harry chuckled. "You're probably right. But all the same, I think I'll cast first anyway. And before we start, I just want you to know that there's no hard feelings. I'm going to work you as hard as I would work anybody else, no more no less."

Blaise gave a curt nod in reply. Harry joined Blaise in his circle as Daphne exited. Harry stood in the smaller center circle and looked at Blaise. He noticed that the rest of the class had gathered around to get a good look at the spectacle to come. Harry smiled grimly as he asked "Ready?"

"Show me what you got, Potter," Blaise replied.

"You asked for it," Harry smiled. "Ready...Begin." And he began. Harry unloaded a long string of stinging hexes at the Slytherin with deadly accuracy. The audience stood in shock as spell after spell connected with the Slytherin's body despite Blaise's attempt to avoid the bursts of light erupting from Harry's wand. Harry was holding back. He could have been casting spells much more quickly than he was, but he wanted to give the boy a chance to dodge some of the spells. After a couple minutes, Harry stopped his torrent of spells and quickly cast a finite incantatem on his adversary to relieve him of his stinging.

"Now that is how you should be casting your spells. The harder you work each other, the better your chances will be in this war. Now Blaise, I imagine you'd like to pay me back for that?" Harry asked with a smirk.

“You weren’t kidding Potter. I think I’ll enjoy having a go at you after that display.” He strode to the middle circle that Harry had just vacated and faced Harry.

Harry gave the boy a nod and called “Ready...Begin.” Blaise began launching spells at Harry as fast as he could manage. But Harry was quick. He nimbly avoided the shots of light coming his way. After his initial torrent of spells failed to connect, Blaise concentrated harder on connecting with his target. He was casting spells as fast as he could but was still unable to match the speed at which Harry had been casting, despite the fact that Harry had been holding back. Spell after spell left Blaise’s wand, but Harry jumped, ducked, rolled, spun, dove, and stepped out of the way, all the while never leaving the confines of the larger circle.

The group of students standing around them watched with varying degrees of shock and admiration. Never before had they seen anything like this. For five whole minutes Harry continued to maneuver within the circle avoiding Blaise’s spells. Eventually he called for Blaise to stop. Panting slightly from effort, Harry took a moment to collect his breath before addressing the class.

He wiped off the sweat dripping down his face and spoke up. “That is how you dodge spells. You’ll find that it is much easier to cast a stinging hex in rapid succession than it would be to cast a stronger curse or hex, so if you can get to a level where you are able to dodge a series of stinging hexes, then you shouldn’t have any trouble dodging any Unforgivables should the need arise.

“I don’t expect you all to be able to dodge every single hex that comes your way today, but I do expect you all to put in some effort in doing so. And I expect you all to make your partners work as well. This isn’t some game. This is war and must be taken seriously. I’m here to help you survive this thing. Now everyone get back to your circles and let’s try this again.”

Harry wasn’t completely satisfied with this next round, but they were getting better. Each partner continued alternating between casting and dodging for the rest of the class. The results were less than

spectacular, and he still suspected many people of holding back, but he was content with the progress they had made for now. Before long, their time was up, and he called a halt to the proceedings.

“You’re getting better, but you still need a lot of work. We will spend a little bit of time during each lesson working on this, so I expect you all to come prepared for a little action. Next week we will work mostly on dueling tactics. Before I begin introducing new spells, I want you all capable of dueling competently; otherwise, the spells won’t do you any good. You’re all dismissed.”

The students began drifting out of the room, many muttering to each other grumpily. His five best friends, those that accompanied him to the DoM last June, all remained behind. Thankfully, Cho did not linger to speak with him this time. It wasn’t that he disliked Cho, but she made him a little uncomfortable. Not only was she his first real crush last year, but their relationship, if you can call it that, had failed spectacularly. He felt nothing for her now, but she seemed to still want to flirt with him. And she had a new boyfriend already, too. She shouldn’t be flirting with Harry when she has a boyfriend, and Harry just didn’t know how to respond to it all.

His five friends were all huddled together speaking amongst themselves. Ginny and Neville were a little flushed but looked pleased. Luna looked as dreamy as always. Hermione looked tired but otherwise unreadable, and Ron appeared to still be grumpy, probably still itching to argue with Hermione about Krum. He never did know when to quit.

Harry approached the group as the last of the students was leaving and asked, “So what did you think?”

“You were amazing,” Ginny piped up.

“Yeah, I don’t know where you learned to move like that, but you’ve definitely given us something to think about. Did Blaise even hit you at all?” Neville asked.

“No, I don’t believe he did. You have to remember that I’ve been doing daily physical training since the beginning of summer: running, working out, and working on agility. It takes a lot of time and effort to get to this point,” Harry explained.

“Well all your training definitely shows,” Hermione contributed. She blushed as she realized the double meaning to her statement.

Harry laughed at her discomfort, as did Neville and Ginny. Harry wasn’t sure if Luna was even paying attention, and Ron was trying to ignore Hermione at the moment. “Well, thank you Hermione.

They began drifting toward the door at that point. Luna parted ways with the group, and they continued on to Gryffindor Tower. The rest of the day was spent around games of exploding snap and wizard’s chess, sitting in front of the fire chatting, and finishing up some last minute assignments as another week of classes approached.

Chapter 7: The Animal Within

Ginny spent the whole day wondering if and when she would ever get a chance to get Harry alone for a few minutes. She was anxious. She wanted to know how his trip to Diagon Alley went. She was pretty curious how he managed to get off the grounds to apparate and back into the school without anyone noticing, but she had already resigned herself not to ask that question. It was none of her business to know all of his secrets, and she had promised him she wouldn't pry into his business. If he wanted her to know, he'd tell her. But she really wanted to know when they could brew the potion and when their training would begin.

But luck was not with her. Harry was surrounded by people the entire day. Ron and Hermione rarely left his side. Neville was almost as bad. And practically every member of their HA class in Gryffindor made it a point to talk to him at some point. Ginny still found herself wanting to call it the DA, but Harry always insisted that everyone call it the HA now. But that's beside the point. She couldn't really blame any of them for wanting to talk to Harry about the class. It was different. And he had put on quite a spectacle.

Growing up in the wizarding world, physical activity was always downplayed. The only real sport the wizarding world had was Quidditch, and while the sport put some strain on the body after hours of play, it was really the broom that did most of the work. They never had to worry about running around anywhere or being quick on their feet, unlike those who grew up in the muggle world. She didn't know much about muggles, but she knew enough about sports like football and basketball to know that there was a lot of running involved and that you needed to be quick on your feet to be any good.

Even beyond the world of sports, muggles did a lot more walking or running around than wizards. The average adult wizard or witch can instantaneously disappear from one spot and reappear in another, eliminating the need to walk anywhere. The only reason one would have to avoid apparation as a mode of travel is because of children. Seeing that children cannot apparate, other means often have to be found. But the floo network alleviates that for the most part. You can floo from your own home to most places you would need to go. And

even in the case that you're going somewhere without a floo, chances are that there is a floo nearby.

Even children in the wizarding world don't run around as much as in the muggle world. They do run and play around to some extent, but a lot of that is done on a broom instead of on the ground. Even younger kids have things like training brooms that will only hover a few feet above the ground to avoid injury should an accident occur. So anyone who grew up in the wizarding world was really walking into something entirely outside the norm in Harry's class.

He had managed to avoid being hexed for several minutes straight by simply running around, ducking, dodging, leaping out of harms way. He made a very good point. There is a defense against the Unforgivables, and that is to not allow yourself to be hit with one. If he was able to dodge successfully against a stinging hex cast in rapid succession, which was very easy to cast rapidly, then what's to stop him from dodging a series of Avada Kedavra's as well? Often times the best solution is the simplest.

But it wasn't the premise behind the drill that had people flocking to him; it was his demonstration. Not only had he managed to cast spells faster than she had ever seen before, he had also managed to move with such quickness and agility so as to avoid being hit with a single hex. His performance was beyond all expectations. So it was natural that everyone who had witnessed the event would want to talk to him about it. But that didn't make it any less frustrating for her.

Why couldn't everyone go up and talk to him all at once? They were all talking about the same things anyway. Harry was bound to get sick of talking about the same thing over and over, telling them the same things, answering the same questions. But no, everyone had to come up and talk to him separately. By the end of the night, she was getting sick of it. When she had asked Harry if he would mind helping her train to be an animagus, she hadn't really known what to expect. She wasn't expecting to be turned down or anything like that; Harry was much too nice to even consider such a thing.

She hadn't expected much out of him, on the other hand. A vague agreement, perhaps. He would tell her he'd be happy to help and that

they'd set something up in the future. She had not anticipated that Harry would run off to Diagon Alley at the drop of a hat to get all the potions ingredients they would need so that they could get started right away. That went well beyond what she had been expecting.

But ever since they had set the whole thing up, she was getting more and more anxious to get started. She couldn't wait to find out what her form would be. She was hoping for a cat or something that could fly, but she'd be happy with a lot of different animals. So long as she didn't end up as something stupid, like an ant or a bug or any kind of a rat. She got herself so worked up thinking that they'd be starting today, that by the end of the day she would know what animal she would be. But at this point, she held little hope that they'd be starting this weekend. Maybe next weekend, if she was lucky.

She was not looking forward to the week to come. She knew that she'd be hard pressed to focus her attention on anything besides animagi. The night was winding down, and she was beginning to think about heading up to bed when something brushed up against her arm, or rather someone.

"Hey, Gin," a masculine voice greeted her.

She started and looked to her side where a black haired man gave her a lopsided grin, his green eyes sparkling. "Hey yourself. You startled me."

"Sorry," he said rather unapologetically.

"I'm sure," she replied steadily. "So what brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"You have a break right before dinner tomorrow, right?" he asked abruptly.

"Err...yes. Why?"

"Meet me in my office after your last class."

She cottoned on at that point, and a smile lit up her face. "I'll be there." He returned her grin and bid her a goodnight. As he turned to leave, she grabbed his forearm to stall him and called out softly "Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks," she told him gratefully.

"Don't mention it." And then he turned and walked up the staircase to the boys' dormitory. After a moment, she shook herself and went to bed. This week wasn't looking so bad after all.

OoOoO

Harry's day was flying by quickly. He found that classes continued to be quite easy for him. His initial success in Transfiguration on the first day of classes had not just been a fluke. All manners of magic were just coming easily to him. He actually began restraining himself from progressing too quickly in public. He would let Hermione beat him to spells here and there to keep up the guise that nothing was out of the ordinary. He wanted it to look like he was just trying hard and taking his studies seriously, not that he was just picking things up with remarkable ease.

Hermione continued to spend the majority of her time in the library. She seemed bolstered every time she would work out a spell before Harry, and part of Hermione's attitude since the start of term started to catch up with him. She was jealous that he was doing better than her in classes. She had become used to being the first one to master every spell. She had been doing it for five years after all. Now this year came around, and Harry was beating her as often as not. Harry found that he didn't feel as bad about this as he thought he might have. Hermione needed to learn some humility. She placed too much emphasis on being the best at everything. But he was careful not to call attention to his new success or to rub it in in any way. That would just be unnecessarily cruel.

But her obsession with studying all day to keep up with Harry was not healthy for Hermione. It was only a matter of time before she began to burn out like she had in their third year. Harry was afraid to broach the subject, though, knowing she would not take it well and most likely deny everything fervently. She would make a grand speech about NEWTs and how important they were. No, this was a lesson she needed to learn on her own. He just hoped that she learned this as quickly as she learned things in class; otherwise, she would have a rough time of it this term.

Before Harry knew it, he was finishing up his last class of the day, and incidentally only his second class: Care of Magical Creatures. Ron, with whom he shared the class, was off to Divination, leaving Harry free to make his way to the Room of Requirement for his daily training without either of his two best friends being any the wiser. He wasn't worried about most of his other friends noticing that he was sneaking away for time off by himself. Nobody else would call him on it, and if they did, the most simple of excuses would suffice.

His two best friends, on the other hand, were an entirely different story. Keeping his training hidden from them was not an easy chore. They were both inquisitive in nature, especially Hermione. And Hermione really could be much too clever for her own good, or Harry's good as the case may be. No, they were bound to get suspicious if they saw him slipping away on his own all the time. And they were bound to question him about it until they got answers. So it was best if they never caught him at it. Luckily for Harry, Hermione was so busy with all her studying in the library, that she probably wouldn't notice his absence anyway.

Ron was another story. Harry had a feeling that Ron would soon ask him where he was spending all of his free time. In the past, any time they had a break, Ron and Harry always spent that time together, the only exception to this being when the two were fighting. So it would be hard to explain his absence during those free periods to Ron. Harry tried to arrange his training during times that Ron would be in class so as not to miss him, but that didn't always work out. And the weekends proved even harder to arrange.

Harry thought about all of this as he warded the room and began his training exercises with the practice dummies in the Room of Requirement. He hated having to be so secretive in everything he did, but at this stage in the game, he couldn't afford anyone else to find out about his abilities.

When Ginny realized that he was the one who had saved her in Diagon Alley over the summer, Harry didn't know what to do. He thought he had been so careful, but thinking back on it, he realized that he made one really big mistake: his hair. He modeled his new hair style on the way he wore his hair in disguise. He never really thought much about it. He had just liked the way his hair looked longer. He had never planned to have any interaction with anyone that he knew while in disguise. And he knew that nobody he saw while shopping would ever make a connection between him and the stranger unless they saw his scar.

When Ginny had figured it out, Harry had briefly considered obliterating her. He had read up a bit on the spell in one of his books, but he had never tried the spell. He would have to do some additional reading about it before he would even think about trying it on another person. So Harry immediately dismissed the thought. He couldn't do that to her. What if something went wrong? He would never be able to live with himself if he caused her any harm. Not only that, but it just seemed wrong to him to do that to a friend. If a death eater found out some vital information, he wouldn't have second thoughts about removing the memory, but doing that to a friend without their knowledge was just wrong.

When he reflected back on it, Harry was just glad it had been Ginny who found out and not anyone else. Ron couldn't keep a secret to save his life. He'd probably tell Hermione first thing, but even if he tried to keep it a secret, the minute Ron lost his temper it was bound to come out. And Ron losing his temper was a given. It was only a matter of when. If Hermione were to find out, she'd feel compelled to tell an authority figure. Not only was Harry breaking the law by performing magic away from Hogwarts, but he was also placing himself in danger. No amount of pleading would ever convince her otherwise. Her tattling would be out of a misplaced way of showing that she cared, but Harry knew that he would never be able to forgive

Hermione if she ruined this newfound freedom for him. So he prayed that she didn't find out any time soon.

Ginny was really the perfect choice if he had to choose for one of his friends to find out the truth. Either Ginny or Neville: both were unassuming and supportive and loyal. But Harry was glad it was Ginny instead of Neville. He liked Neville a lot, but if he only had one person in the world to confide in, Neville wouldn't be his first choice. He had a feeling that it could get really awkward with Neville, and he didn't know if the boy would be able to act normally under the circumstances.

Ginny was handling everything wonderfully. She never called attention to the fact that anything was up. And she didn't push him to tell her everything. She was happy with whatever he was willing to give. In a way he was glad that she had found out. At least now he had someone around who knew, at least somewhat, what was going on in his life. He had Sirius to talk to at night as well, but it was nice having someone his own age, who was at Hogwarts, who could potentially help him out, cover for him if need be.

He was so caught up in his musings and his training that, before he knew it, he was glancing down at his watch to find that Ginny was already out of class. He rushed out of the room and down two flights of stairs to his office. When he threw the door open, he found Ginny sitting in front of the empty fireplace waiting patiently.

"Merlin, Harry! You look terrible," she exclaimed. Then she seemed to realize exactly what she had said and began backpedaling. "I don't mean you look ugly or anything. It's just, you're all sweaty and your face is flushed and you seem to have a couple cuts on your face."

Too much diving around for his own good, apparently. "It's alright, Gin. I don't imagine I look my best right now, but I was just doing some training, so what do you expect? Sorry I'm late. Why don't you have a seat at my desk? All the ingredients are there, and I've written out instructions for you. While you get started on preparing the ingredients, I'm gonna get cleaned up. Then I'll give you a hand with everything."

“Ok...” she said, thinking over what he had said. “You run up to Gryffindor Tower then. I’ll be fine here until you get back.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “I’ll be back before you know it.” Then, without explaining a thing, he pulled his trunk out of his pocket, enlarged it, opened it up, and climbed right in. She was staring at the trunk for several minutes before she realized it and shook herself out of her stupor.

She looked down at the desk and found the instructions that he had told her about. He wasn’t kidding when he said he had written them out. There, on a piece of parchment, was a scribbled list of ingredients and the steps to take in preparing the potion. The writing was a little messier than his usual correspondence. He had probably written the instructions up in a hurry. But it was at least still legible. So she began preparing the ingredients as he had instructed her to do.

Several minutes later, she glanced up and was startled to see Harry grinning back at her. “Hey. So how’s it going so far?”

Not one to be distracted from what she wanted, Ginny ignored his question and asked one of her own. “Where did you go? And how? And how did you get back here?”

He chuckled. It was such a refreshing thing to hear Harry laugh. After everything he had been through in his life, culminating in the rebirth of Voldemort and the death of his godfather, Harry had every right to be angry, upset, and inconsolable. He had every right to lash out at the world. And he had done a little of that last year. He was never intentionally hurtful to anyone, but he did have some problems with his temper the previous year. But in spite of everything bad that had happened in his life, he never let it change him.

The only thing different about him this year was that he seemed to overcome some of his shyness. And that could hardly be considered a bad thing. He didn’t let all the bad things that happened to him kill his spirit. He still loved life and would never stop fighting to create a world where people would be able to enjoy their lives in peace without the threat of a dark lord hanging over them. And in the

meantime, he seemed determined not to let that threat and fear control him. He had written to her over the summer saying that he refused to let Voldemort win. And putting your life on hold worrying about what was going to happen would be doing just that. So he was living his life in the meantime. And it was an inspiration. If he could do it, anybody could. He had more reason to let this war drag him down than anyone else.

His laughter died down and his voice brought her out of her musings. "Well, to put it quite simply: I went into my trunk to take a shower. When I was finished, I came back out."

She just stared at him. What kind of explanation was that? "Maybe you should start earlier than that. Where did you get this trunk of yours? And how did you shower inside of it?"

He laughed again. It didn't warm her heart quite as much as the last time because she was quite anxious to hear what he had to say. Before she knew it, he was talking again. "Well, I bought this trunk over the summer," he said, as he walked over and patted the trunk. "It's one of the models that has several different compartments, not just for storage but also containing rooms. I have a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and living room all inside of there. So I went inside, took a shower in the bathroom, then I came back out."

"How did you get it?" she asked, then realized how stupid the question was. "Wait, never mind. That's pretty obvious. That had to be really expensive though. I knew you had a lot of money, but I can't believe you just bought something like that."

"Well, I do have a lot of money," he admitted quietly. "And I've never really bought much of anything for myself. So this summer I bought myself lots of things: a new wardrobe, both muggle and wizarding, this trunk, lots of books, contact lenses to replace my glasses, and a wand holster. I have more money than I know what to do with, so I thought I'd spoil myself a bit for once." He sounded almost defensive about it, like he had to explain himself before she got mad at him.

“Relax, Harry,” she soothed him. “I’m not going to jump onto your case for treating yourself to something nice. It’s your money, so you might as well spend some of it. If you don’t, then it just sits there and doesn’t do anybody any good. The fact that you have expensive things doesn’t make you like Malfoy.”

He looked immensely relieved to hear her say that. “Thanks.” And he truly meant it. “So anyway, how is the potion coming along?”

And so they moved back to the reason she was there in the first place. She explained that she barely even got started. He pulled up a chair and gave her a hand preparing the ingredients. Before long they were dumping things into the cauldron in specific quantities in a specific order being stirred a specific number of times in a specific direction in between. It was all very exact but not terribly difficult as long as you are paying attention.

After some time, the potion was simmering, all the ingredients added, and now all that was left was to wait. They had just missed the end of dinner, so the two decided to kip down to the kitchens to get something to eat.

Harry tickled the pair, pulled on the doorknob that appeared, and had barely taken a step into the threshold when he felt something collide into his legs. “Harry Potter sir! Harry Potter has come to visit Dobby! Harry Potter is a great and powerful wizard. He is too kind to come visit Dobby. And he has brought his Wheezy, but it’s not his usual Wheezy.”

“Dobby,” Harry said as he pried the elf’s arms from around his legs. “This is Ginny, a friend of mine. Ginny, this is Dobby.”

Ginny was giggling behind Harry at the scene before her. She stepped to the side of Harry and held her hand out to Dobby to shake. “It’s nice to meet you Dobby.”

Dobby looked at the hand in front of him with large, awe filled eyes. “Never before has Dobby been asked to shake hands. Harry Potter’s

new Wheezy is a great witch. She must be to be friends with Harry Potter and to be so nice to Dobby.”

“Dobby,” Harry was struggling to control his mirth, “don’t you think it would be polite to shake her hand.”

In all his praise, the elf had completely neglected the hand that was stretched out before him. “Bad Dobby,” he scolded himself. “Dobby is a bad house elf. Dobby is not worthy to shake Harry Potter sir’s Wheezy’s hand.”

“Nonsense, Dobby,” Harry interrupted him. “You are very worthy to shake her hand. In fact, it would be offensive to refuse to do so.”

“Dobby is sorry, sir,” the elf pleaded, as he tentatively shook Ginny’s hand. Ginny was still struggling to gain control of her giggling.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” she managed to say. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Harry didn’t think it was possible, but the elf’s eyes grew wider at that statement. “You has heard of Dobby?”

“Uh huh. I’ve heard Harry and Ron and Hermione all talk about you a couple times,” she explained.

“Harry Potter and his friends are truly the greatest wizards in the world,” Dobby praised.

“That’s enough of that,” Harry said. “Dobby, we missed dinner and were wondering if you could possibly pull something together for us.”

And the house elves were only too happy to provide. Dobby bustled away and not more than a couple minutes later, a magnificent feast that could have served the entire Weasley family was laid out before the two of them. They began to slowly eat their fill, talking and laughing all the way through it. They spent over two hours in the kitchen before heading back up to Harry’s office. They passed the rest of the time reading and doing homework.

When the potion was finally finished, Harry bottled it up and presented it to Ginny with instructions to drink it that night when she was ready for bed. He warned her that she should probably be in bed already when she drank it, to avoid the possibility of letting the potion induced sleep claim her before she managed to make it under her covers.

When the two returned to the common room, they managed to side step the inquiries on where they had been and why they missed dinner. Ron seemed especially upset over their absence but didn't speak up about it. Harry decided it was best just to let things be and not call any more attention to it than necessary.

The next day, Ginny seemed to be full of life and energy, and Harry found himself wondering what it was she had seen. But he couldn't manage to get her alone to ask her about it. At meals there were always too many people around. He caught a couple glimpses of her in the halls, but she was always surrounded by people.

It wasn't until well after dinner, in the Gryffindor common room, that Ginny practically burst out in a whisper, "I'm a lioness," to Harry the second she was able to get him out of ear shot of all of their house mates. Harry was excited for her. He thought her form was a fitting one. She did have a certain feline grace to her. Maybe once she made the full transformation they could go running together through the Forbidden Forest. That thought left him excited. As fun as it was to play around in his animagus forms, it was a pretty lonely experience. When in his owl form, he occasionally got the chance to fly with Hedwig, which was nice. But in panther form he never had any company.

Everything seemed to pick up as that week went by. Classes were in full swing, although Harry's schedule was pretty light. But he kept himself especially busy with his own training and the HA. Quidditch practices began at the end of the week as well. Right now they were to begin practicing three times a week, and as their first game approached, Harry imagined Ron would step up the practices a bit.

His class work load was nothing compared to what it had been the year previous. Not only was Harry well ahead in his reading, but he actually had less homework to do because he was always one of the first to get the spell correct in class. He realized that part of the reason Hermione was always able to stay ahead was because she never had as much actual work to hand in as the rest of the class. The professors tended to add on additional assignments to those who were struggling in an attempt to help them better grasp the concepts.

This just freed up more time for Harry to study even further ahead and to do some independent reading. He still found himself enthralled with the subject of wards, but he also took a vested interest in healing spells. He put his studies in the field to the test on the minor cuts and bruises he often acquired during his training sessions. They were the simplest spells of the field, but he was able to perform them with ease.

Harry didn't get a chance to do any animagus training with Ginny that week, but they did manage to sit down and schedule out a couple hour long sessions each week that they would try to abide by. He met with Professor Snape for another Occlumency lesson on Thursday, to similar results as the last. Snape attempted to break into his mind with even less success than the previous week, but he didn't seem as strained as the last time. Perhaps Harry had just caught him off guard. Regardless, after several attempts to break into Harry's mind with very little success, Snape told him to continue practicing and to be there at the same time next week.

His HA classes during the week went off smoothly for the most part. It was his weekend HA classes that brought about something unexpected, though not entirely a surprise. Once everyone had arrived, he performed his usual ritual of checking for anybody present who had not signed the contract when, to his surprise, a red glow emanated from a corner of the room, a corner of the room that to the naked eye looked empty.

Harry surreptitiously drew his wand from his holster and called out, "Accio invisibility cloak." The charm worked to perfection, revealing the interloper to be none other than Professor Snape. When Harry asked why Snape was hiding in his class, the man sneered at him and got into a long-winded tirade about Potter showing favoritism in

his classes and wanting to be able to watch without Harry's knowing so that he could see how he handled the class unsupervised.

To Harry's great surprise, the two Slytherin members came to his defense against the Professor's accusations. They emphatically stated that Harry had been nothing but fair thus far and had stood up for them even when some of his own best friends were yelling at him for allowing them into the class. That seemed to quiet Snape down, though he didn't seem any less unpleasant toward Harry as a result.

Other than that, the class went great. Professor Snape even offered a very helpful suggestion when Harry once again had trouble getting the class to take the dodging sessions seriously. Rather than allowing the students to just pair off with their best friends as they had been doing, he suggested that they be forced to pair up with someone from another house so that they wouldn't mind hexing their partner as much as they would their best friend. It made sense, and it worked well too. He still spotted some people giving less than their full effort, and he called them on it. But for the most part, the performance of the casters was greatly improved after the switch. Harry made sure to offer his thanks to the Professor for the suggestion. He received a curt nod in reply, but there was no scathing reply to accompany it, so Harry took that as a good sign.

The next week flew by even more quickly for Harry. He met with Ginny twice that week to work on her animagus form, without much success. He tried to start her off the same way he had: concentrating on her form and willing individual parts of her body to make the change into its animal counterpart. But thus far she had been unable to make any changes to her body. Sirius said that it had taken him months of hard work to accomplish even that, so Harry wasn't discouraged by her lack of success. He told her the same.

He was a bit taken aback when he was asked to stay after his Defense class that Tuesday. Professor Caldwell requested his help teaching the Patronus charm to his seventh year class, having heard how familiar Harry was with the charm. Harry had almost forgotten the comment that the Headmaster had made that he would be asked to help the Defense Professor occasionally throughout the year, either in class demonstrations or in helping him grade papers. Luckily,

the class didn't interfere with anything he had planned. He would help out a week from that Friday. The class was directly after his own DADA class on Fridays, so he would just remain after class to help out with the seventh years.

It was good that his help was not required on the Friday of the current week because Harry had another engagement that day. The class would not actually have interfered with what he had planned, but it would prove to be a nuisance that he didn't want to have to worry about given what he was planning to do that day.

That Friday was a full moon. It would mark the first full moon he would spend with Remus while the man turned into a werewolf. He let Ginny in on that secret since she already knew of his animagus form. If nothing else, she could always help to cover for him if people became curious about his absence. She also helped him work out his plan for how to slip away unnoticed.

He was basically going to feign illness. Thanks to the twins' inventions, it would not be terribly difficult to pull off. The trick would be not to overdo it so as to warrant a trip to the Hospital Wing. He would take just enough of the Skiving Snackboxes to give him a slight fever and cough. He would then let them know that he was a little under the weather and was tired, so he was headed to bed early.

They guessed that Hermione would put up a fight in an effort to convince him to go to the Hospital Wing but decided that Harry would most likely be able to talk her out of it. If she continued to struggle he would promise to visit Madame Pomfrey the next day if he was still feeling under the weather. As a last result, they decided that Ginny would come to his aid if Hermione refused to give up.

That Friday, the plan went off without a hitch. It did take some convincing, but Hermione relented when Harry made the promise to go to the Hospital Wing the next day if he was still feeling under the weather. So Harry made his escape up the stairs and set up a complex illusionary spell around his bed. It made it appear and sound as though Harry was asleep in the bed. He also erected a very minor repelling ward that would discourage anyone from approaching the bed. It was similar to the muggle repelling charms in that it made

people suddenly remember something else they needed to be doing at that moment, but it targeted everyone.

Harry then snuck back out of the dorm under his invisibility cloak and carefully made his way out of the castle and over to the Whomping Willow. With a slight burst of magic, Harry managed to press the knot at the base of the tree to prevent the tree from attacking him. Harry climbed into the tunnel that led to the Shrieking Shack and took off his invisibility cloak, no longer needing it. He made the long trek through the dank passageway until he finally came upon his destination.

He rose out of the trap door to find the room more or less how he had remembered it: trashed. But there was one chair that lacked any of the marks that marred the rest of the furniture of the room. Sitting on that seat was none other than Remus Lupin. "Remus!" Harry exclaimed, jumping up and rushing to embrace the man.

Remus smiled as Harry's head appeared out of the trap door and stood to return the hug that Harry gave him. "It's good to see you Harry. We never agreed on a specific time to meet, so I had no idea when you planned to show up."

"I hope you weren't waiting too long," Harry immediately stated.

"No, no, it's fine. I haven't been here long at all. I was merely stating that I'm glad you're here so early because I have something I need to discuss with you." The seriousness of his tone did not go unnoticed by Harry, who nodded solemnly. Remus pulled out his wand, and with a little wave and murmured incantation, a second chair appeared in the room. "Please, have a seat and make yourself comfortable."

So he did just that. The chair wasn't the most comfortable that he had ever sat in, but he didn't complain about it. It was more than enough to suit him for the time being. "So what is it that you wanted to talk about?" He was anxious to hear just what had this normally calm and collected man worried.

“Well...” Remus began. “Gosh, I don’t know how to start. It’s like this Harry: before Sirius died, he wrote up a will. He basically split up everything he owned in two, giving half to me and half to you.”

Harry sat there, utterly gob-smacked. Whatever he was expecting this conversation to be about, this was not it. He just shook his head trying to grasp what he had just been told. “What? Why? Why now?”

Remus leaned forward and put a hand on Harry’s knee. “I’m sorry Harry. I know this isn’t easy for you. It’s not easy for me either. But it’s what Sirius wanted.”

“But why now? He’s been dead for three months now. Why is this just coming out now?” Harry asked, anger etching his tone. He rose out of his chair and began to pace.

The older man just sat and watched as the last remnant of his best friends, of his former life, wore a whole in the shabby hearthrug. Eventually he spoke up. “There were several complications that arose which delayed the process. There was no body to prove his death. It took a long time to convince anyone he was even dead. In fact, the Ministry still refuses to believe it, but we did manage to bring the goblins around.”

“What? How can the Ministry not believe that he died? Don’t they have some sort of way of tracking that sort of thing?” Harry didn’t understand why this was making him so angry. He couldn’t care less what the Ministry thought. Even if they did admit that Sirius was dead, they would no doubt celebrate the fact. They would claim it as a great victory in the war against You-Know-Who. How they think they can fight against Voldemort when they’re too scared to even say his name was completely beyond Harry.

“They claim that he found a way to fake his death to throw them off his trail,” Remus replied evenly.

“Never mind the Ministry. I don’t care what they think anyway,” Harry ranted.

“Indeed. After we finally managed to convince the goblins that Sirius was in fact dead, we ran into further trouble when trying to execute his last will and testament.” There was an edge of bitterness in his voice now.

Harry picked up on the strain and immediately asked “What kind of trouble?”

Remus sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “The will was contested by Narcissa Malfoy. Being the closest living relative of Sirius, she claimed that she was the rightful heir of the Black fortune.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Harry yelled out. “It doesn’t matter who he’s related to if he made up a will.”

“You’re right, of course,” Remus soothed the young man before him. “And that’s why the goblins eventually decided that her claims were invalid in light of the fact that in his will, Sirius explicitly stated that none of his wealth or property be given to Narcissa or Bellatrix or any of his other relatives, save for a small sum he set aside for Andromeda Tonks and her family. Because of this declaration, Narcissa had very little ground to stand on, and her complaints were eventually tossed aside.

“Which brings us back to the fact that we have both been named as beneficiaries in Sirius’s will. Half of the gold in his vaults will be transferred over to you. He left Grimmauld Place to me with the stipulation that I allow the Order to continue to use it. There are a couple other properties that he owned, but he asked that we work out who would get what on our own. And there are numerous other possessions to be sorted of course. He only specifically listed a couple.”

Harry perked up at this. “What did he mention?” Harry asked, genuinely curious.

“Well, most notably,” Remus paused for dramatic effect, “is the fact that he left to you his newly refinished motorcycle. He had apparently

been working on restoring his old, flying motorcycle for several months.”

Harry felt his jaw drop. He knew the motorcycle in question, of course. It was the one that Hagrid had driven when he was taking Harry from Godric’s Hollow to Privet Drive back when Harry was only a year old. Harry had many dreams about a flying motorcycle when he was little but never realized the significance until he was introduced to the wizarding world after his eleventh birthday. He had no idea that his godfather had been working on it, nor did he know what to think about owning it. It would offer him a way of traveling in the muggle world inconspicuously, provided he didn’t use the flight feature, of course.

When he looked up he noticed that Remus was studying him carefully. He figured the man must have been waiting for some sort of response from him, but he had no idea what to say. “Oh,” was all that came out in his first attempt. “Did you know he was working on it?”

“No,” Remus replied while shaking his head. “I had no idea. I didn’t know he even had the bike, let alone that he was restoring it. He must have asked Hagrid for it at some point.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied distractedly.

“We can go over the specifics some other time. I just thought you should know,” Remus explained to the young man in front of him.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, of course. No, I’m glad that you told me. Where is the motorcycle?”

“It’s in Grimmauld Place right now,” Remus told him. “I could bring it to you next time we meet if you’d like. Otherwise you could keep it there until you’re ready to use it.”

Harry thought it over for a minute. He really had no use at all for the bike at Hogwarts. “Why don’t we leave it where it is for now,” he stated more than asked. “I’ll let you know if and when I want it in the future.”

“Sounds good.” And then their conversation lapsed into more comfortable territory. Remus wanted to hear all about Hogwarts and how school was going for him. He was especially interested in the HA. When Harry explained his dodging exercises the werewolf raised an eyebrow and wanted to hear all about it. Remus asked Harry for a demonstration of his animagus form which Harry was happy to provide. The man was very impressed. Harry considered telling Remus that he was teaching Ginny to be an animagus as well but eventually decided not to. It wasn't his secret to tell.

The time dwindled away, and Remus eventually warned Harry that he should change so that he was ready when Remus made the change into a werewolf. Harry complied, and before long, fur was sprouting all along his friend's body. His bones and muscles reshaped themselves. When the transformation was complete, a formidable looking beast was before him.

The two didn't go roaming the grounds as Moony had once done with his friends back in his own school days. They stayed in the Shrieking Shack keeping each other company. They play wrestled a little bit with Moony always emerging the victor. They eventually settled down and actually got a couple hours of sleep in their animal forms. This was a new experience for Harry, but not as awkward as he thought it might be.

When Remus changed back to human form, he nudged panther Harry awake. When Harry noticed that his former professor was back to normal, he reverted back to his human form as well. Remus thanked Harry profusely for spending the night with him and went on to say how much calmer the wolf was with another animal present. Harry simply smiled and told Remus not to worry about that, that he was happy to be able to help. With a promise to see him next month, Harry began his trek back through the tunnel leading back to Hogwarts.

It was barely dawn, and Harry was tired. Before emerging from the tunnel, he pressed the knot on the Whomping Willow and changed into his owl form while still hidden from view. He flew out of the tunnel and up to the owlery. He greeted Hedwig briefly when he saw her, then hurried back to his dorm room. Careful not to wake anyone,

Harry snuck into his four poster bed and was asleep within a minute of his head hitting the pillow.

Harry missed breakfast the next morning. He almost missed lunch as well. Thinking that he was under the weather, Ron had let Harry sleep in that morning. Left on his own, Harry hadn't woken up until just before lunch time. He had just enough time to take a quick shower and get dressed to meet his friends in the common room before they left for the Great Hall. Hermione was very interested to hear how he was feeling, and he spent the majority of lunch trying to convince her that he was feeling perfectly fine now. He shared a half-amused, half-exasperated look with Ginny when no one else was looking.

Harry was a bit tired that day, but his friends seemed to accept that as coming with the territory of getting over his illness. Harry wasn't about to correct them. He just continued to share small, knowing looks with Ginny any time the subject came up. Reflecting back on it, he really was glad that Ginny knew at least some of what was going on. It was great just having someone who knew. Granted there was still a lot that Ginny didn't know, but he was reluctant to share any more just yet.

There were some secrets that probably wouldn't make a difference if she knew, like his second animagus form, for example. But he chose to keep that a secret until he needed to reveal it. He never knew when he might need to be able to use the form inconspicuously, even to hide from Ginny as well. He had a feeling he'd be sharing that tidbit sooner or later, but there was no rush to do so.

He couldn't bring himself to talk about Sirius. Part of him really wanted to talk to someone about his dead godfather who happened to be visiting his dreams for the past few months. But overriding that feeling was one that forced him to remain mute on the subject. No one else could possibly understand. They'd probably think he was crazy. But he knew better. He knew it was really Sirius. And another little selfish part of him kept it a secret because he wanted it to remain his. This was something for him that he didn't have to share with anyone else.

Then there was the prophecy. That was a complicated matter. He hardly dared to even consider telling anybody about it. Not only would it be incredibly difficult to discuss, but that information needed to be guarded at all costs. And if word ever got out that he had told someone its contents, that person would quickly rise to number two on Voldemort's hit list, right behind Harry himself. If he ever did share the prophecy with anyone, he had to be completely sure that they would be willing and able to guard the information for all it was worth. Even the smallest slip that hinted that they even knew the prophecy was more than they could afford, should the information fall into the wrong hands.

He didn't think he'd ever be able to share it with Ron or Hermione. Ron was too much of a wild card to be trusted with the information. His temper was much too unstable to be trusted with information that sensitive. Not only that, but Harry didn't think he'd like very much how Ron would react to the news. The one good thing that might come of it would be that Ron might finally get over his thick-headed jealousy of Harry. Ron had everything that Harry ever wanted, yet he was jealous over Harry's money and fame. Harry hated his fame and could care less about the money. Ron had a loving family, more siblings than can be counted on one hand, and countless memories from a happy childhood.

Harry would have traded his wealth just for those memories. All the memories he had of life before Hogwarts were of torture and ridicule, all at his expense. Whether he was being beat up by Dudley, mishandled by his Aunt or Uncle, belittled for his freakishness, teased for being different, forced into slave labor by his relatives, starved, or confined to the loneliness, solitude, and darkness of his cupboard under the stairs.

Ron was blind to all of that. He was blind to the fact that Harry was always at the center of attention, good or bad. He couldn't do anything without someone noticing. Everyone always had something to say about him. And people's opinions of him were fickle at best.

Hermione would react terribly to the news when she first heard it. She would no doubt break down in sobs and throw her arms around Harry. For awhile she would be inconsolable. But then her intellectual nature

would kick in, and she'd find some reason for all of them to begin research in the library. They'd look into the nature of prophecies and any theories behind them. Then she'd probably have them all trying to look up different spells that could possibly do the "dark lord" in or any hints about what this power could be. And she wouldn't take no for an answer. She would analyze every single facet of the prophecy, every word and nuance. Then she'd want to discuss Harry's feelings about it. She'd pry into his thoughts and feelings every chance she got, determined to unearth anything and everything. Harry had no intention of subjecting himself to that torture.

He could see himself telling Ginny at some point. He wasn't sure how she would react, to be honest with himself. He knew Ron and Hermione well, but Ginny was still new to him, still a mystery to an extent. She wouldn't react like either Ron or Hermione; he was sure about that. He figured she would either just offer him some quiet comfort, try to make light of the subject, or try to find some way to relate to him. Any way he looked at it, he imagined that she would make him feel better about the situation. But he wasn't ready to take a risk telling her yet. Not only did he not want to put her in danger, but he wanted to get to know her better first. He didn't want to risk telling her the prophecy and having her react badly about it. And even when he was pretty sure he knew how she'd react, he'd have plenty to think about before actually telling her.

It struck him at times just how quickly he had become so close and comfortable with Ginny. Sometimes he wondered how he ever survived without her. When Ron and Hermione got to be too much, usually because of their bickering, Ginny was usually there to pull him away. And when she wasn't around, he found now that Neville made another convenient escape. Not that that's all Ginny and Neville were to him: people he went to when he became annoyed or frustrated with Ron and Hermione.

No, Neville and Ginny were great friends. And he considered himself lucky to have them. Neville had always been around, Harry realized, but he had been too quiet and reserved. Harry was shy enough himself. Stick him with Neville a couple years back and the conversation would be scarce. And of course, a few years back, stick Harry in a room with Ginny and the latter would blush like mad,

stammer an incoherent something, or do something else equally embarrassing, then flee from his presence. How she went from the girl that was terrified by his simple presence to the young woman with whom he had become such good friends, Harry had no idea. But he wasn't complaining.

The day passed by quickly enough after lunch, especially considering that it was a much shorter day than usual for Harry. The next morning he was back on his morning workout routine and another week of classes was laid out in front of him. Harry continued to coast through most of his classes. The only class that put any type of strain on him at all was Potions. He was actually getting the subject material pretty well for once, and he rarely had difficulty producing a passable potion. The main problem in the class was dealing with Snape and his merry band of Slytherins.

In the few weeks of class they'd had so far, Harry had managed to avoid five different sabotage attempts by the Slytherins in the class. Draco Malfoy was the "master mind" behind them all, Harry was sure, but he was not against recruiting other Slytherins to do the dirty work. Not only did this alleviate him of all blame should something go terribly wrong or they get caught, but it also kept Harry on his toes at all times. Rather than just having to keep his eye on Malfoy, Harry now had to pay attention to every single Slytherin in the class.

On top of that, Harry had to put up with Snape's incessant barbs and insults. The personal insults didn't faze him at all anymore. He could only be called an attention-seeking, arrogant brat so many times before the words lost all meaning to him. The man's insults about his father still bothered him a little, but even those were beginning to lose their edge as well.

The ones that really rankled him were the comments relating to Sirius. The first time Snape made such a comment, Harry almost lost it. He was only barely able to rein in his anger before he lashed out at his Professor. He was lucky that he had been able to control himself because with his newfound abilities, he wasn't sure exactly what would have happened. But he was pretty sure that it would have ended up with Snape hexed into oblivion and Harry in deep trouble. Hermione was beside herself with anger after that class. It was

comforting to know that she could get so upset on his behalf. She had even confessed that she had been close to hexing Snape herself, and she praised Harry on his newfound self control.

Hermione was also curious as to how he got so good at potions and all his other subjects for that matter. He had already at least somewhat explained his success in his other classes through his summer studying. Add to that the fact that he was almost always with a book of some sort these days and it wasn't that hard to believe. Potions class was somewhat different though, plus he had always been abysmal at it. Harry tried to explain to her that part of it was that he never put forth an effort in the past, and he was never able to concentrate with the Slytherins and Snape all breathing down his neck. He was simply ignoring everybody else this year. He did manage an Outstanding on his Potions OWL, he reminded her. So the talent must have always been there. She wasn't as happy for him as Harry would have liked, but she accepted his explanation nonetheless.

His Beginner HA class, or BHA as he began calling it in his head, was progressing fairly well. Having a set schedule was definitely helpful in keeping everything going on track. The previous year, the DA had met at irregular intervals so as not to arouse suspicion. And they didn't have two meetings a week either. The only thing that was slowing the class down in any way was the sheer size of it. There were many more students than he had to teach in the DA or even in his Intermediate HA class, IHA. Nevertheless, he knew he would have this bunch caught up to where the IHA began this year by the end of the term if not sooner. For that he was very happy.

In his IHA class that week, he had them doing their dodging drills for the first half of the lesson. The second half he spent introducing them to a new type of shielding spell. Protego was the most basic shielding spell there was. There were more powerful versions of that spell to withstand stronger spells, but there were also entirely different types of shielding spells. Contego, for example, allowed the caster to shield another person.

Protego was only for personal protection. It put a shield right in front of the caster and blocked a single spell. Contego worked similar to

protego except that the shield could be directed to appear anywhere. But it, like protego, would only block a single spell and would not hold up against the more powerful curses and hexes. There were also more powerful versions of each shield which would hold up against stronger attacks. But it would be quite some time before the class was ready for those. Harry was still working on perfecting those spells himself.

Harry's Occlumency lesson that Thursday went even better than the previous two. Snape immediately went on the offensive when Harry came into the room, but Harry was prepared for the assault. For the first time, Harry was able to keep Snape from ever penetrating his outer barriers. Snape continued to assault Harry's mind, but he was never able to penetrate the wall Harry had built.

In the previous lessons, Snape was eventually able to hammer his way through into Harry's mind. Harry was always able to expel the man before he was able to see anything of importance, but that was beside the point. This time the man was unable to even accomplish that much. After 15 minutes of continuous mental battering, both were fatigued. Snape dismissed Harry but did not confirm a meeting for the next week. Harry was going to ask but thought better of it. Any conversation at all with the man was liable to escalate into a duel with how aggravated they both were at the moment.

Harry was tired afterwards, but he was in high spirits. He found it hard to believe how far he had progressed in his Occlumency skills in such a short time. If only things had been different last year.... He refused to dwell on that now. What's done was done and wouldn't be changed. So he concentrated on the here and now and let his success bolster him.

Despite his successes in Occlumency, he still experienced scar pains and the occasional flash of emotion from Voldemort. This fact troubled him because his Occlumency was supposed to block out his connection to Voldemort, but it didn't seem to have any effect on their connection whatsoever. He hadn't had a vision since the one preceding the attack on his friends in Diagon Alley, but he had no idea whether that was a result of his Occlumency or not. There was nothing he could do but wait and see what happened.

He was worried though. It had been a long time ago that he had witnessed his first vision of the summer, where Voldemort promised a party to announce his return to the world. The only attack Harry was aware of since then was the one on his friends, and he was sure that was not related to the party Voldemort was planning. Whatever it was, if Voldemort was taking this long to plan and prepare for it, then it must be something big. But there was nothing they could do but do their best to prepare for the war ahead and wait for it to begin.

His personal training was advancing well. The training dummies that the Room of Requirement provided were a godsend. He still trained with Sirius at night, but they mostly concentrated on perfecting new spells that Harry was learning. Sirius was just unable to keep up with Harry in an all out duel at this point. But the training dummies were more than able to accommodate his needs. They weren't able to simulate a real life encounter with Death Eaters, but they were able to continue to improve his dueling skills.

His ability to dodge spells improved a little every day. He was coming to a point where he didn't even have to by sustaining a shield spell over himself at all times with one hand while still being able to cast spells with his other hand. Maintaining a spell for a length of time was incredibly draining, as he quickly learned the first time he tried it. He was only able to hold a continuous shield for a minute the first time he tried it while casting offensive spells at the same time. And he was left exhausted. But after rigorous practice, he was steadily improving. He noticed a small improvement almost every day.

It was just like working a muscle to become stronger. You push yourself to your limits, and the muscle responds by growing to handle the stress. He continued to push his magic to its limits in his training, and it was growing to meet the demand. He was now able to sustain the shield while casting offensive spells for almost two minutes, which had been enough time for him to dispose of several opponents. But he wasn't satisfied yet. He planned to continue to push himself. As long as he continued to see improvement, that was all the incentive he needed to continue his efforts.

Friday finally rolled around, and after his Defense class, he waved his friends goodbye to wait for the 7th year class. He walked up to Professor Caldwell's desk and asked him what he had in mind for the class. The Professor was going to lecture for a bit on the theory behind the spell. He would call for a demonstration from Harry. Then the two of them would work with the class on conjuring Patronuses. This sounded easy enough for Harry. It was more or less just repeating the lesson he gave the HA on Patronuses.

There were a couple HA members in the class: Katie Bell, Cho Chang, Walter Gatton, Rob Bankston, and Stephen Cornfoot. Cho was the only one able to conjure a fully corporeal Patronus. Katie was close, but her mist was unable to fully take form. The others had all managed a strong mist the last time he had seen them all try to the charm. Professor Caldwell was shocked to find that two of his students were already capable of conjuring corporeal Patronuses. Harry was only mildly surprised to find that Katie had managed to get her mist to take the form of a hawk.

When those two students explained that Harry had taught them, the professor's gaze flicked over to Harry. He wasn't sure, but Harry thought the professor seemed to be quite impressed. The rest of the class flew by rather quickly with Harry moving in between the various students offering tips and advice on how to improve upon their performance. The class ended soon enough, and Harry remained behind as the rest of the students exited. He wasn't sure if anything else was expected of him or if he was free to go, so he thought it best to wait and let the Professor tell him.

"I must say, you really know your stuff," Professor Caldwell praised as the last student left the classroom. "I was a bit skeptical at first, but Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall both vouched for not only your Defense skills but your teaching skills as well. I didn't know that you had already covered Patronuses in your club. It's a very advanced spell, beyond NEWT level even. The only reason I'm even teaching it is because of the threat of You-Know-Who."

“Yes,” Harry interrupted, “that is why I made sure to cover Patronuses as well. We actually began work on them last year before the DA was shut down.”

“And when did you learn the charm yourself?” the professor asked him.

“I learned it my third year here. There were Dementors guarding the castle then, and I was affected pretty badly by them, so I asked Professor Lupin, the Defense professor that year, to teach me how to defend myself against them. We started our lessons in January, and I conjured my first corporeal Patronus at the end of the term,” Harry explained.

“Incredible,” Caldwell exclaimed. “It took me a full year of practice to manage a corporeal Patronus. And I was out of Hogwarts at the time. I daresay I may be asking for your assistance more often, Mr. Potter. And I’ll have to be on top of my game, lest you steal this job out from under me.”

Harry laughed along with his professor. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about just yet. I still have another year of classes here after all.”

“That didn’t stop them from making you an Assistant Professor though, did it?” he teased. “But never mind that. You’re free to go now. And thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome, Professor.” Harry left the classroom then and was surprised to find someone waiting for him.

“Hi Professor Potter,” a woman greeted him.

“Oh no, not you too,” Harry grunted.

His exclamation earned him a small giggle from the woman. “Wouldn’t want to disrespect Hogwarts’s newest and most popular professor, would I?”

Harry put his face in his hands and groaned which earned even more laughter from his companion. "I don't think I ever congratulated you on making Head Girl. So congratulations," Harry made an attempt at changing the conversation.

"Thank you, Harry. Congrats to you as well on being named an Assistant Professor," she told him. "And no, I'm not going to let you just change the conversation that easily."

"Thanks Cho," Harry said insincerely.

"Any time, Professor Potter," she answered back with a wide smile. "Come on, it's about time for dinner. I'll walk you down."

"Alright," Harry relented. The two walked down the corridors to the Great Hall talking about how the term was going so far. The conversation was a bit forced but going on well enough when Harry asked, "So how are things with Michael?"

Cho looked at him sharply. "You heard about that?"

Harry returned her gaze, nonplussed. "Yeah, I heard about it on the train home last June."

"Oh," she replied distractedly. "I don't know, things are alright I guess. I'm just not sure he's really my type any more."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Well, there are plenty of other guys out there. I'm sure you'll find the right one sooner or later."

She smiled at him and said, "Thanks, Harry. That's sweet of you to say."

Harry just smiled back, happy that he was back to Harry instead of Professor Potter. The two entered the Great Hall then and split up to go to their house tables.

His entrance did not go unnoticed by Hermione and Ron, apparently, who wanted to know why he walked in with Cho Chang and what the

two were talking about. Harry avoided as much of the interrogation as possible by answering simply and straight forward. Cho waited for him after class and walked with him to the Great Hall. They talked a little about how the year was going so far, that was all. They didn't seem entirely satisfied but dropped the matter when they realized that Harry wasn't going to give them anything else.

The next day, Harry and Ginny met for another one of their animagus training sessions right after lunch. Harry tried to explain to Ginny how to call up her magic to make the change, but nothing he said seemed to help at all. It was hard to describe how to do it when the whole process was mostly instinctual. It was still early in the training, but Ginny was beginning to show signs of frustration. So far she hadn't been able to change anything. Harry kept reminding her that it took Sirius and his dad months to get that far. She would retort by asking him how long it took him to do it. When Harry would refuse to answer, she would let out a harrumph and try again.

They eventually called it quits for the day, and Ginny still had not made any progress. Harry let her know that it wasn't a big deal and that he'd keep working with her no matter how long it took. That seemed to raise her spirits a little, but she still seemed discouraged at her lack of progress.

They split up right outside his office. She went down to the library, while Harry headed up to the common room. Ron and Hermione were both seated in chairs by the fire. Hermione with her head in a book and Ron with a book in his lap, not that it was getting any attention from the redhead. Ron's eyes lit up when he noticed Harry approaching. Hermione was too focused on her book to take notice of much else.

Harry plopped down on a sofa across from the two chairs and called "What's up, guys?"

Hermione looked up from her book long enough to say "Oh, hi Harry." Before she even finished his name, her face was once again hidden by the tome.

“Harry,” Ron called in an urgent whisper. “Where’s the Marauder’s Map?”

“Huh?” Harry asked him.

“The Marauder’s Map, it wasn’t in your trunk. Where is it?” Ron asked impatiently, leaning forward on his chair.

“What do you mean it wasn’t in my trunk?” Harry asked in a measured tone.

“I mean it isn’t in your trunk. I turned the whole thing inside out looking for it,” Ron explained as if Harry was a dimwitted child.

“You mean to tell me that you went digging through my trunk looking for the Marauder’s Map?” Harry asked in the same deliberate voice.

“Yes,” Ron said, glad that Harry was finally catching on, “and it wasn’t there. I need it.”

“And what exactly do you need it for that you felt the need to dig through my trunk?” The warning in Harry’s voice was clear, except to Ron who was completely oblivious.

“I think Ginny’s been sneaking around with a guy, but I can’t seem to catch her at it. I wanted to take a look at the map to see where she was and who she was with,” Ron explained, clearly seeing no fault in his chosen course of actions. Hermione’s attention was peaked at this revelation, but she kept her nose in her book.

“So let me get this straight. You went through my things, to look for my map, so that you could spy on your sister?” Hermione cringed at the icy tone in Harry’s voice.

“Yes!” Ron practically screamed through a whisper. “And it wasn’t there. Did somebody steal it?”

“And what exactly made you think that it was alright for you to go through my trunk?” Harry asked, trying valiantly to keep his temper in check.

“How else was I supposed to find the map?” Ron asked as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“You didn’t think to ask me?”

“You weren’t around, and I needed it right away so I could catch her in the act. If I waited until you came back, I could have missed the opportunity to catch her.” Ron was clearly exasperated that Harry did not seem to get the point.

“So you felt justified to go through my things on the off chance that your sister was snogging some guy in a broom cupboard so that you could catch her in the act.”

“Yes.” Ron was struggling to keep his voice down at this point. “Now do you know where it is? I might still be able to catch her.”

“Unbelievable,” Harry exclaimed.

“Huh?” was Ron’s only response as he looked at Harry as though he had sprouted another arm.

“You have got to be the thickest person I have ever met,” Harry bit out.

“Hey,” Ron protested, angry and confused at this turn of events. “What do you mean by that?”

“How can you just sit there and admit to rifling through my things and not even feel the least bit sorry for it? And that’s not to mention the fact that you did it to spy on your sister. And you just admit to all of this as if it’s the most normal thing in the world, like you didn’t do a thing wrong.” Harry’s voice was starting to rise.

“What are you on about?” Ron asked hotly. “It’s none of your business anyway. Ginny’s my sister, and I need to look out for her. Not that I expect you to understand what that’s like.”

Harry’s eyes widened dangerously and his voice was icy. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well you don’t exactly have any family, do you?” Ron asked matter-of-factly. Hermione gasped audibly and held a hand over her mouth as she finally looked up from her book. Harry was now standing up in front of the couch, completely stiff. It was clear to her that he was struggling to control his emotions, but she wasn’t sure who was going to win that battle.

“No,” Harry finally replied. “No, I don’t have a family, Ron. Thank you very much for the reminder. Next time I catch you going through my trunk it’ll be detention with Filch for invading another student’s privacy. And for your own good, stop prying into Ginny’s life.” Harry turned abruptly on his heel and marched out of the common room. The room shook with every step he took.

Ron watched Harry stomp out of the room. When he was gone, Ron sat back and looked toward Hermione. “What’s got into him?” Hermione shook her head and huffed loudly, then raised her book and proceeded to ignore Ron entirely. After a minute, Ron stood and walked away muttering, “Mental, the whole lot of them,” under his breath.

Chapter 8: Red-Heads In All Shapes and Colors

Several punching bags that looked an awful lot like one of Harry's best friends had the stuffing beaten out of them that day. Harry headed straight to the Room of Requirement after exiting the common room. After Harry reduced his anger to a manageable level, he sought out Ginny. Using the Marauder's map, Harry found that she was in the library, sitting at a table with several other 5th years.

Ginny looked up as Harry walked over to the table and noticed his approach. "Hey Harry, what brings you here?"

"I need to talk to you about your brother," Harry said as calmly as possible, "in private."

Ginny looked into his eyes as he said this and must have seen something there, for her eyes widened momentarily. She closed the book she had been reading and collected her things, stuffing them into her bag. "I'll see you guys later," she said to her friends as she rose and walked out of the library with Harry. The two walked in silence up to Harry's office. Once they were inside, Ginny immediately turned to Harry and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Your brother," Harry started to say heatedly. He paused and took a deep breath before continuing in a slightly calmer voice. "Your brother turned my trunk inside out looking for the Marauder's Map so that he could spy on you and find out who you've been snogging in broom cupboards."

Ginny's eyes bugged out at that. "I haven't been snogging anybody in any broom cupboards. Never have, matter of fact."

"That's beside the point," Harry began, then changed tact. "Weren't you dating Michael Corner most of last year?"

"Yes, but we never did much. I mean we did kiss, of course, but we never really reached the full out snogging, groping stage that would require a broom cupboard," Ginny explained somewhat uncomfortably.

“Oh, er, well that’s...” Harry stammered. “Right. Anyway, back on topic. Ron thinks that you’ve been sneaking around snogging some bloke throughout the castle, and he was determined to catch you in the act. So he went through all of my things looking for the Marauder’s Map so that he could catch you with the guy that he thinks you’ve been snogging.”

“That smarmy git,” Ginny shrieked. “I swear, he is the most...ugh, he is so frustrating. Just because he’s too much of a thick-headed prat to get a girlfriend, he thinks he can just go and dictate my life for me.”

“Yeah, I thought you might react like that,” Harry told her. “Then get this,” he continued, “when I was trying to yell at him for going through my stuff and trying to spy on you, he tells me it’s none of my business, that as your brother he has a right to look out for you, and that he didn’t expect me to understand.”

“He didn’t.”

“He did,” Harry said evenly. “I asked him what he meant by that. His reply was: ‘Well you don’t exactly have any family, do you?’”

Ginny’s reaction exactly mirrored Hermione’s. She gasped and raised a hand to cover her opened mouth. “No. Please tell me he didn’t say that.” The look in Harry’s eyes told her quite plainly that he did in fact say that. “Of all the insensitive...what did you say?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t remember exactly. I was so angry at the time, I’m just happy I didn’t blow up the common room. I think I thanked him for reminding me of that fact, then told him that I’d give him detention with Filch if he ever went through my things again. And I warned him that he should stay out of your business if he knew what was good for him.”

“Damn straight he should,” Ginny stated emphatically. “But we can’t just let him get away with all of that.”

“No,” Harry replied, “we can’t, which is why I asked you here. We need to plan some revenge.”

Ginny’s lips twisted into an evil smirk. “That’s what I like to hear. But before we begin planning, what’s this Marauder’s Map you were talking about?”

Harry looked at her for a moment like she was completely crazy. Then he slapped himself on the forehead and said, “I keep forgetting that you haven’t exactly been around for all of our adventures. The way we get along now, it feels like we’ve been friends all along. Let me tell you a little story about the Marauders, a legend in Hogwarts history....”

And so Harry began the tale of the mischievous Marauders. He told her how his father and Sirius decided to become animagi to keep Remus company during the full moon and how they taught Peter as well. He fast-forwarded to the twins finding the map in Filch’s office in their first year, and how they gave the map to him during his third year. He then dug the map out of his new trunk to show her how it worked.

To say she was impressed would be an understatement. “We could go anywhere with this, so long as we didn’t get ambushed from both sides.”

“Well yeah, and in that case there’s always my invisibility cloak,” Harry offered. “I can’t believe Ron never mentioned anything about any of this.”

“Ron never tells me anything. Ever since he got back from his first year at Hogwarts, he’s wanted nothing to do with me. I guess that’s not true any more. Now he considers himself in charge of my love life,” Ginny explained bitterly.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said sincerely. “You know Hermione and I never meant to steal Ron away from you or make you feel left out. If I had known, I would’ve tried to include you....”

“Oh Harry, I don't blame you,” Ginny hastily interrupted. “You have nothing to apologize for. I mean, I probably would have fainted if you were to come up to me and ask me to come hang out with you guys. I imagine half the reason he didn't want me around is because I was so embarrassing with my crush. But even when we were at the Burrow during the summer after your first year, before you came along, he didn't want anything to do with me. He was too grown up and cool for his little sister.”

“Well, all the more reason for some payback, right?” Harry asked in an attempt to change the subject.

“Right,” Ginny agreed with a smile. “What did you have in mind?”

They spent the rest of the day planning and plotting. They were so involved in their scheming that they missed the start of dinner, but they made it down to the Great Hall with plenty of time to spare and enjoyed their dinner sharing many knowing looks throughout the experience. They were both greatly looking forward to pulling this prank off. Their looks did not go unnoticed by Hermione, however, who was wondering just what was going on between the two. And wondering if maybe Ron didn't have the right of it earlier, at least in his guess as to what activities Ginny was getting up to with “some bloke.”

The next day, Professor McGonagall put in an appearance during both of his HA classes. The BHA was learning stupefy, which caused the lesson to be a bit chaotic, with students collapsing left and right, sometimes onto the carefully laid out cushions and other times not. McGonagall did not interfere or help in any way. She simply observed unobtrusively as Harry went about his class. The class went by like normal, by Harry's standards.

After lunch, he went straight back to the Room of Requirement, and he beat his Head of House there by ten minutes. And she beat the first of the IHA students by five. They spent those five private minutes chatting about Harry's first class. McGonagall stressed how impressed she was at the way he handled his lesson, especially with such a large class. Harry thanked her modestly and insisted that he

really didn't do that much. The kids practically taught themselves, after all. But he was really very proud to have earned her praise. She didn't give it out often, but when she did she always meant it.

She ducked into a corner before the first of the students arrived to stay out of the way. The class started without any of the students realizing she was even in the room. Harry ignored her presence and carried out his lessons as normal. They began working on the shielding charm where they had left off the previous class. He had the students separate into groups of three. They were to trade off between three different positions. One would do the casting of the shield spell on one partner while the other partner attempted to hex the one who was being shielded.

When Ron whispered something to Seamus and the two offered to team up with Blaise with mischievous smiles on their faces, Harry smelled trouble. So when he called for everyone to begin, he paid extra attention to that specific trio. Ron was starting off by casting the shield on Blaise, while Seamus would be attempting to hex the Slytherin. Ron nodded at Seamus, a smile on his face. Seamus mouthed a hex and waved his wand. A bright red light shot out from his wand towards Blaise, Harry thought it might be *furnunculus* based on the color, but he wasn't entirely sure.

Ron half-heartedly waved his wand and spoke the incantation. Predictably, he did it all wrong, not even making it look like he was trying. What happened next took him by surprise, however. Instead of being hit by the boil inducing hex, Blaise cast his own shield and managed to deflect the curse into Ron. Harry was running over to their group as fast as he could.

Ron was cussing up a storm as boils began popping up on his face. Seamus looked about ready to cast another hex at Blaise, who was looking decidedly smug with the way things had turned out. Harry almost forgot to release his wand from his holster before he cast the first spell. He flicked his wrist and caught the wand as it popped out of his holster. Two paralyzing curses were headed towards the two Gryffindors in the blink of an eye.

“Hold it right there,” Harry called out, inadvertently calling the attention of the entire class. “Twenty points from Gryffindor for that display of idiocy. If I see one more stunt like that, I’ll throw you both out of this class before you can blink. Is that understood?” He realized belatedly that they were both still frozen, so he released them from the spell.

“What are you punishing us for?” Ron protested hotly. “He’s the one who hexed me.”

“I was watching you the entire time, Ron. It was a terribly planned and executed stunt, one that Blaise saw right through. You didn’t even try to make it look like you were actually casting *contego*. He just gave you what you deserved for trying to get in a free hex on him. Now, if I ever catch you trying to pull a stunt like that in my class ever again, I will not hesitate to throw you out. Is that understood?” Harry demanded authoritatively.

“Yes,” Ron mumbled so quietly that Harry had to strain to hear it.

“Seamus?” Harry asked, directing his gaze to the Scot.

“Got it,” he replied contritely.

“Good. Now apologize to Blaise and get back to work,” he told them. Then looking around and noticing that everybody was staring, he called out, “This isn’t some performance. All of you back to work now.”

The rest of the class passed by smoothly enough. At least there were no more incidents like the one he had just resolved. He had them working on their shielding for most of the class, but also made sure to include plenty of time for the dodging drills, still including the stipulation that they must pair off with a member of a different house than their own.

After the class ended, Ron stormed off angrily, the first one out the door. Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna all remained behind again as the rest of the students all left at their own paces. Harry noticed

that Professor McGonagall was still in the corner of the room she had retreated to earlier. When only the five students remained, she finally rose and walked out towards them. His four friends all had their back to the Professor, so Harry spoke up. "Why don't you guys all head out? I think Professor McGonagall would like to talk to me about the lesson."

Four heads whipped around at that pronouncement to find the Professor in question ten feet behind them, a rare smile twitching on her lips. "Indeed, I did wonder if I might have a word, Mr. Potter."

His friends all nodded their acceptance and bid Harry goodbye. He watched them all go and turned back towards his Professor as the door closed behind them.

"That must have been very difficult for you, standing up to Mr. Weasley like that," she offered. She drew her wand and conjured two stiff-backed wooden chairs. "Please, have a seat."

Harry shrugged and complied, taking the seat opposite her and studying his professor carefully.

"I must say, I think you handled the situation quite well. I'm not sure the paralyzing hexes were necessary, but they were nonetheless effective at quickly diffusing the situation before it could escalate any further," she told him honestly.

"Thank you," he replied. "It's frustrating that they won't even try. Don't get me wrong, not everyone is that bad, but there are only a few students who actually seem to accept Blaise and Daphne. Most just ignore them entirely, but then there are the more vocal few who adamantly oppose their presence. Ron is one of the most vocal." He ran a hand through his hair, brushing it back out of his face.

"Mr. Weasley lives in a black and white world, Harry," she explained to him. "He lives in a world where all Slytherins are evil. This world is of his own making, of course, but for him it is very real. You have to remember that he grew up in this world and all of its prejudices. He may not have anything against muggles or muggle-borns like many

pure bloods, but that is because his parents taught him that muggles were just as good as wizards and witches, just different. They never stressed that not all Slytherins are bad. In fact, they have probably unknowingly encouraged that perception at times. But I have to say that I'm surprised at how quick you were to accept Slytherins into your classes. I had expected you to put up a bit of a fight about it."

Harry shrugged. "I've never had a problem with Slytherins in general, just certain ones. If I hadn't met Draco Malfoy before the sorting ceremony, I'd probably be in Slytherin myself, so it would be a bit hypocritical of me to judge them all."

"What do you mean?" McGonagall asked, leaning forward in curiosity.

"Huh?" he asked. "Oh, right. The sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin. I had to talk it out of it. After two meetings with Malfoy, he managed to put both Hagrid and Ron down, who happened to be the first two people to really be nice to me, so you can imagine that I wasn't all that impressed with his attitude. He wanted to see me and talk to me because I was famous. I could tell that right away. So when it got to the sorting, I wanted to be as far away from Malfoy as possible. Plus I had already been fed the stories from both Ron and Hagrid that Slytherin house was known for turning out dark wizards. But it was Malfoy that made me fight the hat so adamantly."

She smiled at that pronouncement and didn't even try to fight it. "I'll just have to remember to thank him for that next time I see him." Harry chuckled. After a moment she was stifling a giggle. Harry gazed at her sharply. He had never once seen her laugh before. It was somewhat unsettling but not unpleasant. It would take a little getting used to, seeing this human side to her. "Sorry," she said after regaining control. "I was just imagining Severus's reaction if he found out how close you were to ending up in his house."

Harry cracked a wide grin and chuckled at the thought. The greasy git probably wouldn't have known what to do. He would want to hate Harry and constantly belittle and take points from him, but he would also want to favor him because he was a member of his house, and

Snape always favored Slytherins. Finally he said, "He wouldn't have known whether to hate me or to coddle me like he does the rest of his house." He clapped a hand over his mouth. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Nonsense," she said with a smile. "I must have yelled at him over a hundred times for doing just that, but he refuses to even acknowledge the fact that he does it. And Albus refuses to get involved in the matter, so we all just have to live with it."

"Mmhmm," Harry mumbled noncommittally.

"But back to the matter at hand," she said in her normal, serious tone. "I must say that I am impressed with how you handled both of your classes today. There were some members of staff who were hesitant to offer you the Assistant Professorship, and I am glad to see that their fears were entirely ungrounded, not that I expected any less from you."

"Thank you," he replied sheepishly, cheeks coloring slightly.

"There's no need to get embarrassed," she gently rebuked him. "You should be proud. Not only do you teach the material effectively, but you've managed to earn the respect of all of your peers. They listen to you and follow your directions without question or complaint. That's a remarkable feat for anyone, but especially for someone your age. People don't give out respect lightly. It's something that has to be earned. And your students appear to think that you've earned it."

Harry met her gaze this time as he said, "Thank you."

"That's better," she replied with a smile.

"This is nice," he told her. At her raised eyebrow he continued, "Being able to just talk normally. I never thought I'd have a conversation like this with you or see you laugh. It's nice to see a more human side of you as opposed to the stern façade you always wear in class and around students."

She laughed lightly again and answered, "Yes, well, as I said people do not give out respect lightly. After several years of teaching, I learned that the best way to ensure that your students didn't act up on you was to make sure they knew that you would not tolerate any foolish behavior."

"Well it works wonderfully," Harry told her honestly. "After that first class where Ron and I showed up late, I knew that you were one teacher I did not want to get on the bad side of."

"May I ask you a question, Harry?" McGonagall asked him, tone turning serious once again.

"Of course," he replied evenly.

"What would you have done if Mr. Zabini had not managed to deflect Mr. Finnigan's curse?"

Harry replied without hesitation. "Detention with Filch for the both of them."

"Really?" she asked, surprised. Harry only nodded in reply. "And do you seriously intend to remove the two from your class should they act up again?"

"If they ever try something like that again, I won't hesitate to throw them out," he replied forcefully. "I've warned Ron enough times by now. He's never tried anything like that before, but he's let his mouth run too many times already. It puts me in a tough position because I don't want to make an example of him just because he's one of my best friends, but I also don't want to cut him a break for that reason either. But what he tried to do today was inexcusable. He's lucky I didn't throw him out right then and there."

"You were very quick to respond, I noticed," she commented.

"When I saw the three of them partnering up, I figured something was up. Ron and Seamus were both grinning like mad as well, not exactly hiding the fact that they were up to something very well,"

Harry explained. "I thought about stepping in before they could try anything, but I figured if it wasn't today it would only be next time or the time after that. This was something we needed to get out of the way. And I didn't want to alienate Blaise either."

"That's a very mature decision," his professor extolled. "You've grown up a lot this past year."

"You know, you're not the first person to tell me that," he replied wryly. "I guess when life keeps throwing obstacles at you, you're left with little choice but to learn to tackle them." Harry was reminded of when and why he had adopted that outlook on life. The prophecy had been weighing on his mind, and he had been fretting over the fact that he would have to face and defeat one of the most powerful wizards in the world. And he was only fifteen years old at the time, sixteen now, and was not receiving any type of additional training to help prepare him for the inevitable confrontation. So he had decided to take matters into his own hands. It seemed like a lifetime ago to Harry, but it had only been a few months since then. Harry had already come a long way, but he still had a long journey ahead of him.

"Well, I don't want to keep you from your friends any longer. Keep up the good work," she said, standing abruptly and vanishing her chair. Harry stood as well, and soon his seat was also gone. The two then walked towards the exit. As Harry reached for the doorknob, her voice stopped him. "Oh, and Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Best of luck with Mr. Weasley," she said earnestly. "I imagine he'll be a bit put out for a while, but I'm sure he'll come around eventually."

"Thanks Pro— Minerva," he told her, meeting her gaze. "I appreciate that."

She gave him one last smile, then he turned and opened the door. The two parted ways, Harry headed toward Gryffindor Tower but doubled back to the Room of Requirement to get in some of his own training before dinner.

When he went down to dinner, he sat with Hermione, Neville, and Ginny. Ron, he noticed, was off sitting with Dean, Seamus, Parvati, and Lavender, looking as though nothing was bothering him. He was smiling and laughing with the rest of them as if he sat with them every day. But once Harry sat down, he put Ron out of his mind and concentrated on his food and the conversation around him.

His friends were all curious to know what he and McGonagall talked about. Harry kept his answers simple and vague. They talked about his classes. She observed both the BHA and IHA today. Yes, he knew she was there the whole time. No, that isn't why he was so hard on Ron and Seamus; he would have done the same even if she was not there. She just told him that she was impressed with the way he handled his classes. They talked briefly, then left.

They were all curious as to why they didn't see him until dinner if their meeting was that short, so Harry told them that he needed time to himself to gather his thoughts and to go over the progress they had made in their lessons that day. Hermione and Neville seemed to buy that, but Ginny looked skeptical. She cocked an eyebrow at him when the other two weren't looking. He just shrugged in response.

The rest of the evening passed by quickly, spent mostly writing essays for the week ahead. Harry often smiled as he finished his essays, knowing that last year each would have taken him at least twice as long to write. He didn't even need Hermione to look over them for him, nor did he need to look over her notes to verify any of the information. Oddly enough, Hermione actually seemed put out by that fact. She often offered to read through his essays or asked if he needed any help. He always thanked her for the offer, but politely declined, saying he was getting along fine.

At first, this behavior puzzled Harry. Hermione had been getting on his and Ron's cases for the past five years to study more and to do their homework on their own. But now that he actually was, she seemed to want the old, lazy Harry back. He realized that while she may have sometimes felt like she was being taken advantage of in the past, it was probably comforting to know that they depended on her.

This was not the only behavior of Hermione's that set him thinking. She had not dropped the issue of Sirius's death. Every so often she would not so subtly open up a booklet entitled "The Dangers of Denial" or "Dealing With Loss" in front of him. This irked Harry to no end, but he chose to just pointedly ignore her any time she tried anything like that. Ginny seemed to notice what Hermione was trying to do and how it frustrated him, so she would often offer Harry an encouraging smile, for which he was always grateful.

Quidditch practices were going pretty well for Gryffindor. The members were starting to come together to play as a team rather than a bunch of individuals. Ginny and Katie had hit it off immediately and played like they had been teammates for years. It took a little longer for Stephanie to find that same rhythm, but she was starting to work her way into it. Jack and Andrew were getting better, but they were still a far cry from the Weasley twins in the beater position. Ron was on top of his game. Assuming his nerves didn't overcome him come game time, the other teams would be hard pressed to get much of anything past him. And of course Harry was flying as well as he ever had, if not better.

Harry had always felt at home in the air. The first time he had taken to the air on a broom, it had been completely natural and instinctive. So it was unsurprising that one of his animagus forms was an owl. Flying through the air in owl form felt just as good. It was like coming home for him. It was where he belonged. And ever since then, he had felt even more at home in the air, whether in owl form or on a broom. And his flying abilities reflected that.

He was now much more attuned to air currents and thermals than he had ever been before making his transformation. Any time he needed to race across the pitch, he used this to his advantage by finding the path of least resistance. It also aided him in his maneuvering as well. He knew ahead of time what effect a sharp turn at any given moment would cause. There were spots where the action would be facilitated, while there were others that would hinder the change in movement. It took a little bit of learning to get his form down on his broom, since his instincts were geared more toward flying as an owl. But once he did, it was a sight to behold.

His teammates often complimented him on his flying after practice, none more so than Ginny. The first few times she had commented had left Harry slightly embarrassed and at a loss for words. After that, he always tried to pay a little attention to her own flying during practice so that he could have something to compliment her on in return. He was satisfied to see her cheeks fill with color the first couple times he did this, but eventually they were both comfortable with the other remarking on their abilities.

Practices became a little strained with Ron mad at Harry, but his anger faded after a few days. It returned that Friday, though not directed directly at Harry, when the prank Ginny and Harry had set up came into fruition. They had charmed his robes so that as soon as he sat down at Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, they would turn a shocking pink, with red hearts scattered throughout. In the middle of those hearts would be the initials H.G.

Ron didn't notice the change at first; he was too focused on his breakfast. The snickering started small, with people trying to hide it behind their hands. But once the first person began laughing outright, the entire hall was soon filled with laughter. It didn't take Ron too long to realize that everyone was looking at him. When he looked down and saw his robes, his eyes widened in horror, and a deep red color crept up his face and all the way to his ears. Needless to say, Ron flew out of there like a bat out of hell. Speaking of bats, Harry thought he might have seen Snape give off a ghost of a smirk, but it was gone before he could really tell. Knowing Snape, Harry probably just imagined it.

Ginny and Harry shared many looks over the table that morning, and every time their eyes met, they would both be overcome with laughter. After several times, Hermione caught on and questioned the two. "Was that your handiwork?" She at least had the decency to keep her voice down so as not to be overheard.

Their eyes met again, and Harry and Ginny again burst out in laughter, all but confirming Hermione's suspicions. Eventually the two calmed down, and Harry managed to say, "Well after what he said in

the common room last weekend, can you really blame us for wanting a little payback?"

Hermione looked back and forth between the two. "No, I guess I can't. He did have it coming after that. I take it that means you told her what he said?" she asked Harry, cocking her head towards Ginny.

"Oh, he told me everything my dear brother said," Ginny responded. "About his suspicions that I was snogging some guy in broom cupboards throughout the school and about his intentions to catch me in the act in some misguided attempt at protecting me. He also told me what the prat said to Harry about his family." She added the last bit almost too quietly to hear.

Hermione's eyes softened noticeably at the comment and looked towards Harry to make sure he was alright. "It was pretty funny," she commented to lighten the mood. It succeeded in sending her two friends into another peal of laughter, and they finished their breakfasts chatting amicably.

Harry was thankful for the lightness of the morning and for the fact that Hermione didn't ask about the H.G. in the hearts on Ron's robes. He sorely needed something to smile and laugh about after the prior night. Thursday morning at breakfast he had received a short letter delivered by a school owl. On it was a short note written to him by the headmaster.

Dear Harry,

Please meet me in my office after dinner tonight. I shall give you a hint for the password. It is a muggle confection that is often referred to as everlasting. I look forward to seeing you there.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

The note was not completely unexpected. He had actually been expecting a meeting with the Headmaster sooner than this. He had

thought the man would take a more active interest in his life and in his classes, but he had not even spoken to the man since their meeting on September the first. They were now over a week into October.

He had to ask Hermione about the password, since he had very little knowledge of muggle sweets, not having had the privilege of being allowed them as a kid. His relatives, Dudley particularly, had always taken great pleasure in denying him such treats, while at the same time gorging themselves. When Halloween came around, Dudley always made a spectacle of himself, showing off all the candy he had received and stuffing his face with it in front of Harry.

Harry had spent the entire day in nervous anticipation. When dinner finally arrived, he ate hurriedly, but didn't leave early because the Headmaster was still present. Once he had left, Harry waited a couple minutes before announcing his own departure. He walked quickly through the hallways and gave the password to the stone gargoyle as he approached. As predicted, the gargoyle sprung aside, revealing the familiar spiral staircase. Harry stepped on, and it spiraled upwards until he was standing in front of the door. As he lifted his hand to knock he heard the Headmaster call, "Come in, Harry."

Harry pushed the door open and strode into the office. It looked more or less the same as it had every other time he had seen it. The former headmasters and headmistresses were all pretending to sleep in their portraits. The room was filled with various silver instruments that all seemed to be doing something, though what Harry could not say.

Fawkes was atop his elegant perch watching his progress into the room. "Good evening Headmaster, Fawkes," Harry called as he strode into the room. He stopped to stroke the brightly plumed bird before proceeding to the chair which the Headmaster gestured him to.

"Good evening Harry," he greeted. "I take it you had no difficulties determining the password?" His eyes twinkled in delight at the thought of the muggle sweet.

“Actually I have Hermione to thank for that,” Harry corrected. “I was never really allowed sweets growing up with the Dursley’s, so I’m only familiar with a few muggle candies.”

Dumbledore’s eyes dimmed slightly as he replied, “That’s too bad. I’ve always said that one should be allowed to rot one’s teeth to one’s own delight before your permanent ones sink in. To miss out on the opportunity is a travesty.”

“Yes, well there are a lot worse things to miss out on than candy,” Harry mumbled under his breath.

“Did you say something, Harry?” the old man questioned.

“No, sir,” Harry replied evenly. “I was wondering if you had any updates on what Voldemort is up to. I haven’t had a vision since over summer, and the papers haven’t had anything lately. I’m worried that he’s planning something big.”

“Alas, I fear you are correct,” the Headmaster replied with a sigh. “There has been very little movement to go off of, but I fear that the start of the war is quickly approaching.”

“What is the Order doing to prepare? Have you been able to recruit new members now that the Ministry has finally come around?” Harry asked eagerly.

“I’m sorry Harry, but I cannot discuss Order business with a non-member,” he replied gravely.

“How can you sit there and tell me that,” Harry demanded. “How am I supposed to prepare for the war if I don’t even know what’s happening?”

“You’re not,” the old wizard deadpanned.

That stopped Harry dead in his tracks. “What? But the prophecy....”

“The prophecy says that you must one day face Voldemort,” he interrupted gravely. “But you are sixteen years old, Harry, a student. You are nowhere near ready to confront him. For now it would be best if you enjoy your last two years here at Hogwarts before worrying about your role in the war.”

“How am I supposed to just sit back and do nothing when I know that I’m the only one who can stop him?” Harry challenged.

“I will not even consider including you in Order business until you have graduated, and even then I am reluctant to include one so young. Fred and George Weasley have been pleading their cases ever since they left the school last Spring, but they have yet to be inducted into the Order. You are all too young to be putting yourselves on the front lines.” His voice was tired but forceful.

“I’m not asking you to send me out on missions,” Harry amended. “But don’t you think I should at least know what’s going on. How am I supposed to make any decisions if I don’t have all the information I need?”

“Any decisions you have to make regarding Voldemort should not be made on your own, Harry,” Dumbledore intoned. “We are all here to help you.”

“And where were you all last June when I needed you,” Harry yelled. “If you had told me the truth back then, the whole mess at the Ministry would have been avoided and Sirius might still be alive. And now you’re repeating your same mistakes all over again.”

“Harry, I’m going to have to ask that you calm yourself,” Dumbledore replied evenly. “Had you not let your temper get the better of you last year, you would have remembered that Professor Snape was here to help you out. The school always has a member of the Order available should you need one, if only you would remember that. Now, I think it’s time we move onto the matter at hand.”

“Unbelievable,” Harry muttered.

“ Professor Snape informs me that you have made some advancements in your Occlumency skills. I would like to test your abilities myself, if that is agreeable to you.”

“ How can you expect me to be able to trust Snape?” Harry demanded, ignoring Dumbledore’s previous statement.

“Professor Snape, Harry,” he corrected. “And while he might not always show it, Professor Snape has your best interests at heart. Now, shall we begin?”

An idea formed in Harry’s mind as he nodded to the Headmaster. It wasn’t something he had really practiced before, but if he could get it to work, it would be worth it.

“ Very well,” the Headmaster replied. “On my mark. Ready? Legilimens.”

And Harry felt the Headmaster probing at his outer barriers. Inside his own mind, he began digging through the trunk housing his memories of Snape. He found all of the Occlumency lessons he had last year as well as the rest of the memories he had of Snape. He took the Occlumency ones first, but ended up grabbing the rest as well.

He felt for the Headmaster’s presence and pinpointed exactly where he was outside his barrier. Making up his mind, Harry tore a hole in the barrier directly in front of the old codger and started forcing his memories of Snape through it, beginning with the Occlumency lessons he provided the year before. Once all the memories were through the barrier, he quickly fixed the hole and reinforced the whole barrier.

What seemed like hours later, but was actually only a couple minutes, Harry felt the Headmaster’s presence completely vacate his mind. He focused on the man in front of him, who he noticed was slumped in his chair, rubbing at his head. “My best interests?” Harry asked, as he rose from his seat and walked to the door. “Good night, Professor.” And that was how he had left the office that night. As he glanced back, the Headmaster had not moved from his position.

That night, Harry had to gather up all of the memories that he had released and store them back in the trunk, which was not a pleasant experience, as it forced him to relive many of them. As he laid in bed, he wondered if maybe he had been too hard on the Headmaster, subjecting him to all of those memories at once. But in the end, he decided that it was necessary. The old man refused to see Snape for what he really was. If that was what it took to give him some perspective, then it was a price he would have to pay.

Harry barely glanced at the Head Table all morning, but when he did, he noticed that the Headmaster's usual joyful demeanor was subdued. The twinkle in his eyes was dimmed, though he did seem to enjoy the show somewhat, much to Professor McGonagall's contempt.

Harry's spirits were lifted considerably after breakfast. That morning he had spent the majority of his workout time with a punching bag, taking out his frustrations. He had planned on resuming the activity after breakfast, but now he was feeling well enough to continue with his usual training.

That afternoon, Professor Caldwell asked him to stay after DADA again. This time, the professor requested Harry's help with some essays he was grading for his second year classes. He had graded a few of the essays complete with comments to give Harry something to go by. Harry told him he would be more than happy to help and asked when he needed them done by. He needed them by Tuesday morning at the latest, which was plenty of time by Harry's standards, so he told the man it wouldn't be a problem.

That night, Harry told his godfather about the prank he and Ginny had pulled on Ron. Sirius got a kick out of the story, though he called Harry an amateur. "You're going to have to do much better than that if you want to earn yourself a place among the marauders," he had told Harry. He laughed along with his godfather, although the comment did get him thinking about something. He resolved to talk to Ginny about it when the time came.

The two had another animagus training session the next day. Harry tried changing tactics this time. Instead of having her just try to change one of her body parts into its feline counterpart, he had her perform simple spells with her wand. He told her to concentrate extra hard when she did it, to try to feel the magic within her at work. He performed some spells of his own and tried to describe the feeling that he wanted her to detect. After several attempts, she started to see what he was talking about.

She wanted to jump right back to trying to change her hand into a paw, but Harry stopped her. "Stick with one thing at a time, Gin," he told her. "Right now you know how the magic feels for a levitation charm, so try to duplicate that without your wand." And so their training took a bit of a detour. They were no longer really practicing the animagus transformation. He was teaching her wandless magic.

She struggled with that as well. She was unable to levitate anything that day, but she was close. She was attempting to lift a quill off of Harry's desk in his office. The quill never fully left the desk, but it did move around a bit and the end of it lifted off the desk before falling back down. It wasn't the results they were hoping for, but it was progress. And for the first time since they started the training, they both felt that they had finally accomplished something. They were one step closer to the end result.

Harry finished grading the DADA essays by early Sunday morning, though he didn't manage to get them to the professor until Monday morning. Ron was more or less back to his old self by Sunday. He still grumbled a bit when people brought up the incident, but he was able to laugh about it a bit now as well. He had no idea who the culprit was. He was half convinced that the twins had found some way to get him despite the fact that they were no longer in Hogwarts. Harry and Ginny were both fine letting him believe whatever he wanted.

The two met again on Tuesday before lunch and picked up where they left off. This time Ginny was able to lift the quill completely off the desk by about an inch or two. She managed to hold it there for several second before it dropped back down. It still wasn't that much, but both were absolutely thrilled at the progress.

That Thursday, Harry received another note from the Headmaster, nearly identical to the one from the week before. He learned from Hermione that Skittles encourage you to taste the rainbow. When Harry entered the office that evening, the tension was thick, and the greetings were strained.

The Headmaster began, "I must apologize, Harry. I often forget what it is like to be young. I should not have presumed to tell you that you could trust Professor Snape when you have no basis upon which to place that trust. I have my own reasons for trusting him, but I should not expect that to be enough for you. I'm afraid I did not realize just how strained your relationship was with him."

"I have been telling you that for years, Professor," Harry stated as calmly as he could. "You just didn't want to believe it."

"I'm afraid you are correct yet again," he sighed tiredly. "I like to give others the benefit of the doubt, and I am reluctant to think ill of anyone whom I respect, despite the evidence available. I wanted to believe that you were exaggerating Professor Snape's crimes against you, as he so often does with you. I am sorry for not taking you seriously."

Harry was a bit taken aback at this candid apology but quickly recovered to respond. "I forgive you. And I'm sorry for what I did last week, but it was the only way I could think of to make you see...."

"No apology is necessary, Harry," Dumbledore interrupted. "It was not a pleasant experience but one that I needed to see. I must say that I am surprised that you wanted to resume your lessons with Professor Snape after last year."

Harry smiled at his Headmaster's indirect way of asking a question. "Yes, well I had planned on doing some private studying on the subject over the summer. I knew that Professor Snape would not hold back in testing my progress, and I wasn't disappointed. He assaulted my mind with everything he had, often struggling to remain standing afterwards. And it took all of my concentration to keep my barriers up.

Voldemort will be just as vicious should he ever try to break into my mind, and I intend to be prepared.”

Dumbledore chuckled appreciatively. “I must say I am impressed with your foresight. I’m sure you didn’t mind the fact that you were showing Professor Snape up at the time either.”

“An added benefit,” Harry agreed jovially.

“Indeed,” he replied, eyes twinkling full force once again. “Now that we have that business behind us, I was wondering if I might test your Occlumency once again...without any distractions this time.”

Harry grinned back at him, “Very well.”

And so the Headmaster once again tested Harry’s mental barriers. He was methodic in his efforts. Where Snape used brute force to batter against his shields, Dumbledore poked around looking for weaknesses. Harry concentrated on the man’s presence and worked on reinforcing the barrier in front of the Headmaster’s position.

When the Headmaster finally struck, it wasn’t anything at all like the battering ram Snape seemed to employ. The Headmaster stabbed his barrier like a knife quite suddenly, and before Harry knew what was happening, he was tearing a hole big enough to enter through. Harry quickly rallied to the cause and met his presence at the breach. He concentrated with all of his might at expelling Dumbledore from his mind. He left without much of a fight.

After a couple minutes where both regained their breath and thoughts, the Headmaster spoke. “Your mental shields are strong, but as you could see they are not impenetrable. You did react quickly, however. I did not fight to stay in your mind, but even if I had, I don’t think I would have been able to remain for very long before you managed to expel me. I am rather impressed at your progress. It normally takes one over a year of study to achieve this level.”

Harry smiled appreciatively. “Thank you sir.”

“I would like to continue working with you,” the Headmaster continued. “If the date and time are agreeable to you, we could continue meeting Thursday nights after supper until you are able to withstand my assault.”

“That would be great,” Harry replied honestly.

“Excellent,” he returned warmly. “Now you best be off to enjoy some time with your friends. I daresay that by tomorrow evening there may be some divisions among the students.”

“Oh?” Harry questioned curiously.

His eyes were positively sparkling. “Yes, I have an announcement to make. I imagine about half the school will be delighted, while the other half may not be quite as excited at the prospect.”

“I see,” Harry replied carefully. “I don’t suppose you’ll give me any hints as to what that announcement might be....” He left the statement lingering in the air.

Dumbledore chuckled heartily. “I think you’ll have to wait and find out with the rest of your peers. You may be an Assistant Professor now, but I think this is one thing that you should hear with everyone else.”

Harry nodded his head. “Alright, I guess I can live with that. Good evening Headmaster.”

“A goodnight to you, my boy,” was the genial reply as Harry opened the door and left the Headmaster’s office.

Harry was pleased that their relationship was no longer as strained as it had been when he left the office last week. He was still upset with the Headmaster for not keeping him informed on the progress of the war and the Order, but that was a battle for another time. If the twins had not yet managed to infiltrate the Order, then he had little hope of doing so any time soon. It was too bad, really. The twins might be immature, but they were really brilliant. Given a little direction, they

could use that creative genius of theirs to really further the war efforts. And that thought gave Harry one of his more brilliant ideas.

Oddly enough, Harry received an owl from the twins the next morning. It was an update on their shop, which seemed to have done quite well during its first month in existence. Harry was not a business man, but he knew numbers as well as the next person. The twins left out most of the business terms and just sent him the raw numbers of their costs versus their profits, and they were very much in favor of the latter. He resolved to write them back later that night both to congratulate them on their success and to let them in on the idea he had thought up the night before.

Professor Caldwell praised him after DADA that afternoon for his help in grading the essays. He said that he read through several of the essays and looked at the comments Harry gave and the grades he assigned and claimed that he couldn't have done a better job himself. Harry blushed predictably at the acclaim but otherwise took it in stride. The professor promised that he would be requesting his help again in the future, to which Harry could only grin ruefully.

He really didn't mind the grading that much. It was relatively easy to do; it just took him time to get through all of those essays. And by the time he had finished, he was entirely sick of the subject matter. He just hoped that the professor didn't ask for that kind of help too often.

When dinner rolled around, Harry found himself becoming anxious. The Headmaster promised an announcement that day, and if he planned on making due of that promise, it would be coming at dinner. He was sitting with Hermione, Ron, and Neville who all noticed that he was preoccupied, so he let them in on the secret. They spent the rest of the meal discussing what it could be. None of them guessed correctly.

Shortly after the main course disappeared and the deserts took their place, the Headmaster stood from his central seat at the Head Table and tapped his glass with his fork. "If I could have everybody's attention please." The noise in the Great Hall abruptly died down to nothing. "Ah, thank you. I have an announcement to make." Harry could make out the sparkle in the man's eyes quite clearly even with

the distance between them. "Your professors and I have been discussing this for awhile and it has been decided that over the holidays we will be hosting a Yule Ball for all students fourth year and above."

Excited chatter broke out amongst the four house tables in the hall, mostly from the female population, while a less vocal grumbling could be heard from the male students. After a minute, Dumbledore raised his arms and the noise level tapered off. "Thank you. I see that many of you are quite excited at the announcement, and rightfully so. We encourage all students to remain at the castle over the holidays to celebrate. The ball will be held on Christmas day. We will also be providing many activities for our younger students to participate in as well which will include sledding and ice skating among other things. Any suggestions for additional activities should be provided to your heads of house. As before, any student below fourth year will only be allowed to attend the actual ball if invited by a student in fourth year or above."

A lot of the younger students' eyes lit up at the thoughts of activities being set up for them while the others got to have their ball. Chatter once again ran throughout the student body. The Headmaster continued again after a minute. "I would advise all the gentlemen out there not to dally in asking for a date, or you may find that your lady of choice has already been asked. Now enjoy your desserts." And with that he sat back down and enjoyed himself watching his students.

Meanwhile, Ron was grumbling next to Harry. "Can you believe this mate?"

"It makes sense if you think about it," Harry commented after a moment. "The war is going to be starting soon, so it makes sense that Dumbledore would do something to try to convince people to stay in the safety of Hogwarts."

"That's very perceptive Harry," Hermione said with a smile.

Ron, on the other hand, continued on grumpily. "No, can you believe that we have to go through this again. I mean, it was bad enough

having to find a date to the ball last time. Why does he have to go and make us do it again?"

"Oh, it's not that bad," Harry said, much to the surprise of his three friends within earshot.

"If I remember correctly," Hermione commented after she took a moment to recover from her shock, "you had quite the time of finding yourself a date last time, Harry."

Harry looked up and met Hermione's gaze unflinchingly with a smile on his face. "Yeah, and I was absolutely clueless at the time. Not to mention the fact that I was hung up on Cho. I'm not going to make the same mistakes again. This time I'm going to ask someone I know that I'll have fun with, and I'm not going to wait to do it." By the time he finished that statement, he had already decided who he planned to ask.

"Really?" Hermione asked interestedly.

"Yep," Harry replied easily.

"Prove it," Ron groused.

"What was that?" Harry asked his friend.

"I said prove it," Ron said grumpily. "If it's so easy to get a date for the ball, then prove it. Get yourself a date." Ron looked rather impressed with himself for throwing a wrench into Harry's gears, not that Ron actually knew what either of those was.

Harry, on the other hand, looked completely nonplussed. "Alright, if you insist." He turned his head and spotted her a few seats down, speaking excitedly to her dorm mates. "Hey Ginny," he called.

She turned away from her giggling friends to spot who it was that was calling to her. Her eyes met Harry's, and she smiled. "Yes Harry?" All

of her friends turned their attention towards him at that point, making him pause.

“Um...” he shook himself a little. There was really nothing to be embarrassed about. “Do you want to go to the ball with me?”

Her eyes widened considerably, as did the eyes of all her friends and Harry’s friends as well. Ginny’s cheeks stained pink as she realized what he had just asked, and she smiled brilliantly, which prompted another burst of giggles from her friends. After she took a moment to stare at her friends reprovably, she turned back to Harry. “I’d love to, Harry.”

“Great,” he called to her. Ginny turned back to her friends who all broke out in giggles once again, and they started gossiping excitedly. Harry turned back to his friends who were all staring at him, mouths gaping and eyes still wide. “See,” Harry said, “it wasn’t that hard at all.” He then dug into his dessert, ignoring the fact that their gazes were still on him.

Finally, after a full minute of silence, Ron broke out of his trance. “Bloody hell, mate,” he cried out. “Did you just ask my little sister to the ball?”

Harry looked up from his pudding. “Yes, I believe I did. Is there a problem?”

“She’s my sister,” Ron barked out, as if that explained everything.

“So I’ve noticed,” Harry replied dryly turning his attention back to his pudding.

“Just what are your intentions?” Ron questioned hotly, forcing Harry to turn back toward him.

“Excuse me?” Harry asked icily.

“What are your intentions toward my sister?” Ron repeated heatedly.

“I hardly think that’s any of your business,” Hermione interrupted irritably.

“Of course it’s my business,” Ron replied distractedly, never turning away from Harry. “She’s my little sister.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, Ron” Neville piped up from across Ron, “but she is quite capable of looking after herself. And besides, you can hardly call her little any more.”

This was not the most conducive thing to say in regards to Ron’s temper, but Harry didn’t really care at this point. Ron really was being ridiculously overprotective, and someone had to do something about it sooner or later. It wasn’t fair to Ginny. “Too right, Neville,” he added in for good measure.

Predictably, Ron saw red. “It’s you, isn’t it?” he all but shouted, causing several heads at their table to turn towards them.

“Ron, keep your voice down,” Hermione reprimanded.

“What are you on about?” Harry asked civilly.

“You’re the one she’s been sneaking around with, aren’t you?” Ron asked hotly but more quietly. “That’s why you wouldn’t lend me your map. You’re snogging my sister in broom cupboards.” His tone was definitely accusatory, as though that was a heinous crime.

Harry laughed. It was probably the wrong thing to do at that moment, but he couldn’t help it. The situation was just too funny. He managed to calm himself down after a moment. He looked Ron right in the eye unflinchingly and stated very slowly and clearly, “I have never once snogged your sister. We’re just friends.”

Ron studied him intently for a full minute before he calmed down noticeably. “You’re not just saying that, are you mate?” he finally asked, the hope evident in his voice.

“No, I’m not just saying that,” Harry replied truthfully. “But you really do need to get over your overprotectiveness. Ginny’s old enough to make her own decisions, and she’s perfectly capable of looking after herself. If she wants to snog some guy, there’s nothing you can do to stop her. I highly suggest that you think long and hard about that before you do something stupid that strains your relationship with her any further.”

Ron didn’t look like he was paying much attention at this point. “Yeah, mate. Sorry for blowing up at you like that.”

Harry just shook his head somewhat dejectedly, sorry that Ron was totally missing the point. “It’s alright, I guess.” He looked around and noticed that half of the hall had cleared out during their argument. “What say we head back up to the common room?” His three friends agreed, and they all stood to exit the hall.

As they were walking through the giant doors and into the Entrance Hall, a voice called out, “Harry!” They all turned and spotted the source of the voice: Cho Chang. She walked over to them. “Hey Harry, hey everyone,” she greeted cheerfully.

“Hi,” was the collective response from his three friends.

“Hi Cho,” was Harry’s own response. “What’s up?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked, and then added “Alone,” as an afterthought.

Harry glanced at his friends then back to Cho. “Sure, I guess.” He turned back to his friends again. “I’ll meet you guys back up in the common room in a minute, alright?”

His friends all agreed and called their goodbyes as they strode up the stairway on their way to the seventh floor. Harry turned his attention back to the seventh year in front of him. “What can I do for you?”

“ Exciting news, with the ball, don’t you think?” she asked conversationally.

“Er, yeah, it should be fun, I guess,” he replied.

“You know, Michael and I recently broke up,” she told him suddenly.

Harry was unsure how to respond to a statement like that. She didn't look all that upset about it, but he figured he should offer some condolences to be polite. “That's too bad,” he responded uneasily. “But as I said, I'm sure you'll find someone who's more suited for you in no time.”

“That's very sweet of you to say,” she replied, mimicking her earlier response to the same sentiment. She fluttered her eyelashes a bit as she said it.

Harry began feeling uncomfortable with the situation. “Listen, Cho, I'm really sorry, but I've got a letter to write that I need to get off to the owlery tonight, so I've got to run. But we'll talk again soon, alright?”

Cho looked disgruntled but nodded anyway. “Okay,” she said dejectedly. Her voice then took on a more optimistic tone as she added, “I'll see you in class on Sunday?”

“Of course,” Harry replied matter-of-factly. “Bye Cho.”

“Bye Harry.” And Harry beat a hasty retreat. When he made it back up to the common room, he found his three friends all sitting around the fire waiting for him. It was Hermione who spoke up first.

“So what did the lovely Miss Chang want?” she asked, grinning knowingly.

“Apparently she and Michael Corner have broken up,” Harry said as he slumped down in a chair near them.

“Oh?” Hermione continued. “And are you now finding yourself wishing that you didn't already have a date?” she asked innocently.

“Are you kidding?” Harry asked incredulously. Hermione was grinning like the Cheshire cat until he spoke again. “I’m so glad I didn’t hesitate to ask Ginny. After she told me that, I told her that I had a letter to write and that I’d see her later. I’m hoping that by the time I see her again she’ll have heard that I’m going with Ginny so she won’t bother me again.”

All three friends were staring at him, once again openmouthed. “Can you believe the nerve of her?” Harry asked them. “She acted as though she expected me to fall at her feet and beg her to come with me to the ball as soon as I heard that she was free. As if I’d ever make that mistake again.”

Ron was grinning like mad now. Neville also had a small smile, while Hermione was looking more pensive. “You’re really completely over her, aren’t you?”

Harry snapped his attention to her. “Of course I am,” he stated like she was crazy for even thinking otherwise. “We have nothing in common. I fell for her before I knew her. She was just a cute girl who played Quidditch. In my mind I made her out to be something she wasn’t. No, I couldn’t be happier to be going to the ball with Ginny. I know we’ll have fun together.”

Hermione smiled winningly at him. “That’s good to hear. I always knew she was all wrong for you.”

“Well you could have shared that little tidbit with me a little sooner,” Harry grumbled good-naturedly. “Would have saved me a whole lot of trouble.”

“Aw, mate, what would be the fun of that?” Ron called out.

“Prat,” Harry retorted, chucking a pillow in his direction. Ron dodged and the pillow struck Neville.

“I hope you know, this means war,” Neville said as he chucked the pillow back at Harry. Harry managed to swat it away, where it hit Hermione. Not one to be throwing pillows around, Hermione pulled

out her wand and sent the pillow to smack each of the boys in the heads until Neville called out, "We surrender. We surrender."

Ginny and her friends entered the common room at that point. She left her friends and came over to join them in front of the fire, smiling broadly the entire time. "Hey guys."

The five of them spent the evening talking, laughing, and playing games. It wasn't until a couple hours later that Harry finally got around to writing his letter to the twins.

Dear Gred and Forge,

Congratulations on the shop. That's great news to hear. I'm glad that you're doing so well for yourselves and that my money helped you get where you are. I still say you're nuts for giving me 10 of your profits, but who am I to complain? But anyway, listen, I heard that you two have run into some difficulties worming your way into the Order. I have a business proposition for you, which I will fund completely, that will not only put your creative geniuses to the test, but should also give you a strong case to present to Dumbledore as to why he should let you in.

This is what I have in mind...

Harry didn't finish his letter until slightly after curfew. When Harry announced to his friends that he was off to the owlery to send it off, Hermione, ever the prefect, spoke up. "But Harry, it's after curfew. You're not allowed in the halls."

Harry grinned knowingly at her. "Ah, but you are not quite correct there, Hermione."

"What do you mean? It's definitely after curfew..." she asked uncomprehendingly.

Harry's smile grew wider. "Yes, it is after curfew. And students are definitely not allowed out in the halls after curfew." Hermione nodded as if her point was proven. "I, however, am not an ordinary student;

therefore, that rule does not apply to me. As an Assistant Professor, I am allowed out well after the usual curfew."

Hermione considered that for a moment. "You really shouldn't abuse your new privileges though...."

"I would hardly call this abusing them," Harry interrupted lightly. "It's been over a month, and I have yet to use that particular benefit. And it's not like I'm just going for a nighttime stroll. I have a purpose for my trip."

"Alright I guess," she conceded. "Just don't wander around. I know you're technically allowed to be out, but I doubt that would stop Professor Snape or Filch from trying to give you detention or from taking points."

"Fair enough," he replied. "But I could always take my case to Dumbledore and get anything overturned, since they have no grounds to punish me."

"Do you mind if I tag along," Ginny piped up. "I need to owl Mum. I was just gonna wait and do it in the morning, but if you're going there anyway...."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Hermione immediately spoke up.

"Nonsense," Harry remarked. "Students are allowed out of the common room in the presence of a professor. Sure, you can come along, Gin."

"I really don't think you should push it," Hermione insisted.

"Relax, Hermione," Neville surprisingly spoke up. "Harry's a big shot professor now. The normal rules don't apply to him."

"Right, now that that's settled, I think we'll be off," Harry announced. "Ready, Gin?"

“Just a minute,” she replied, rifling through her bag. After a moment she pulled out an envelope and looked up. “Alright, I’m ready.”

“Well then,” he said as he held out a hand to help her up. He then gestured her forward. “After you.”

The two exited the portrait hole, only to be called after by the fat lady. “Where do you two think you’re going? It’s after curfew.”

Harry turned around. “We are headed to the owlery, and the curfew does not apply to me. In case you didn’t notice, you are speaking to an Assistant Professor.”

“So sorry, Professor Potter,” she replied unapologetically. “Don’t be stopping in any broom cupboards on the way.”

The two teens sniggered. It was Ginny who finally replied, “We’ll try not to, but we make no guarantees.” This renewed their laughter, and the two set off again.

After walking in comfortable silence for a couple minutes, Ginny spoke up. “Thanks for sticking up for me to Ron at dinner.”

“You heard?” he asked, looking over his shoulder at her smaller frame.

She turned her head toward him to meet his gaze. “It was kinda hard not to. I was ready to hex him to pieces, but you handled the situation well enough. It’s probably better that I didn’t hex him anyway...would’ve caused a scene,” she continued ponderingly.

“And landed you in detention,” Harry added.

“Right,” she said. “We don’t want that.”

“Of course not,” he agreed. “I was tempted to play with him a little when he accused me of snogging you in broom cupboards, but I figured it was best not to do that in such a public place. Ron’s voice

was already starting to rise, and you never know what he might yell out when he gets worked up like that. I figured it was best to diffuse the situation before it got out of hand.”

“Good point,” she approved. They were both quiet for a moment before she blurted out, “Why did you ask me?”

He turned toward her again, “Huh?”

“Why did you ask me to the ball?” she repeated.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked in return. She raised an eyebrow at him in return, but remained silent, her gaze piercing. “I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather spend an entire evening with, to be honest. I knew that we’d have fun and enjoy ourselves no matter what.”

“Oh,” she replied distractedly as she thought over his words. “So it wasn’t just to prove your point to Ron?”

“Huh?” he asked, not understanding what she meant by that.

“Well Ron is the one who put you on the spot, forcing you to ask someone right away. I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t just ask me because I was convenient or just happened to be within earshot,” she replied carefully.

“Ginny,” he said, stopping in his tracks. He grabbed her hand and swung her around to face him. “I would think you knew me better than that. I was planning on asking you already. I was just going to wait until later tonight when we were in a less public setting.”

“Well good, as long as you didn’t just ask me because it was convenient,” she returned.

“Of course not. I’m actually kinda looking forward to the ball. I didn’t get to enjoy the last one at all because I spent the whole time wishing I was with someone else. This year I’m going with who I want to be with,” he told her earnestly. “And it doesn’t hurt that she’s one of the prettiest witches in the castle.”

He wasn't disappointed to see her cheeks stain red at his last remark. She slapped him on the arm then tugged on his hand. "Come on. If we take too long, we'll incur Hermione's wrath."

"And don't forget the fat lady's inquisition about which broom cupboard we stopped in," Harry added good-naturedly.

"And Ron's," she agreed, less cheerfully.

They reached the owlery shortly thereafter. Ginny called Pigwidgeon down from his perch and began tying the letter to his leg. Harry looked around for Hedwig but didn't see her anywhere. And she wasn't an owl you could miss, being the only white one in the school. He reached out with his consciousness to attempt to call her through mindspeak. "Hedwig, are you there? I have a letter I need you to deliver."

She replied back immediately, "I'll be right there human Harry."

"Thanks girl," Harry sent out as he turned his attention back to Ginny while he waited. She had finished attaching her message and now held Pig in her hands as she looked over at him.

"Aren't you going to send out your letter?" she inquired.

"Of course, I'm just waiting for Hedwig," he answered as if it were obvious.

"Um, Harry? You realize that you could be waiting all night, don't you? Owls are nocturnal. She's probably out hunting right now," Ginny said as if he was slow.

Harry just smiled at her knowingly. "Not to worry, Gin. She'll be back any minute now."

As if on cue, a snowy white owl burst through one of the windows in the rafters. She soared gracefully down to the two of them and alighted on Harry's outstretched arm. "There you are girl. Thanks for

coming back. I need you to deliver this to the twins for me,” he told her as he tied the letter to her leg. He stroked her feathers appreciatively for a minute before she gently nipped at his ear and took off. Ginny had already released Pig and was staring at him openly.

“How did you know that she was on her way back?” she asked outright.

Harry shrugged, “I just know my owl is all. I knew she’d sense that I needed her. She’s incredibly intelligent, you know.”

“You seem really close to her,” Ginny returned unsurely.

“She was one of the first friends I ever had,” Harry replied candidly. “And she’s the only one who’s there for me all year round. We’ve been through a lot together, she and I.”

“What do you mean she’s the only one there for you year round?” she asked abruptly. “You know we’re always there for you, Harry. Ron, Hermione, and I. And Neville and Luna too. Not to mention the rest of my family.”

“Oh I know,” Harry hastily assured her. “I just meant that she’s the only one who’s actually there with me over the summer at the Dursley’s.” He shivered unconsciously as he remembered the first summer they had spent there together, when his Uncle Vernon had barred his window and locked Harry in his room. Hedwig had been locked in her cage, and the two had shared the meager helpings of soup and bread that his relatives provided him through a cat flap in his door.

“Is it really that bad there?” Ginny asked hesitantly, sensing Harry’s change in mood.

Harry looked at her incredulously. “Don’t you remember the summer before your first year when the twins and Ron stole me away halfway through the summer?”

“Of course I do,” she said, not sure where he was going.

“And don’t you remember what they said about my window being barred and the locks on my door?” he asked her straightforwardly.

She gasped and shot a hand to her mouth which had dropped open in disbelief. “I figured they were exaggerating to Mum so that she’d go easy on them. I never realized it was really that bad,” she told him earnestly as she reached out to give his arm a gentle squeeze. Harry just shrugged in response. “Have you told anybody? I’m sure Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t make you go back there if he knew....”

“He does know,” Harry interrupted tensely, shrugging out of her grasp and walking over to a nearby window. He gazed out into the darkness for a long moment before turning back to her. “He’s always known and has never done a thing about it. Did you know that my first Hogwarts letter was addressed to The Cupboard Under the Stairs, Number 4 Privet Drive?”

“Cu—Cupboard under the stairs?” she asked tentatively, afraid of what she was about to hear.

Harry nodded grimly and took a couple steps back toward her. “Yeah, that was my bedroom for ten years, until the letters began arriving. They took the letter away from me and saw the way it was addressed and thought that if they moved me into a real room that the letters might stop coming. So they moved me into Dudley’s spare bedroom, where they kept all of his broken toys.”

“Do you mean to tell me that your cousin had two whole bedrooms to himself, while you were stuffed into a cupboard under the stairs?” Ginny all but shrieked, her tiny fists clenched painfully at her sides.

Harry nodded. “And that’s not even taking into account the guest bedroom, which is almost twice as big as that room.”

“Unbelievable,” Ginny muttered. “How can they make you keep going back there knowing all this?” She asked this more to herself than to Harry.

“We really shouldn’t be talking about this here,” Harry interrupted. “I don’t even know why I told you so much. I usually try not to talk about it too much. People just get this look where they feel sorry for you. I can’t stand that look. The last thing I need is pity.” He was rambling to himself by this point.

“Harry,” Ginny interrupted.

He snapped out of his reverie and turned toward her. “Sorry, got lost in myself there. Listen, promise me you won’t tell the others anything that I told you. Ron and Hermione know about the summer after my first year obviously, but I’ve never told anyone about the cupboard under the stairs before. And I’d really rather people not know.”

She nodded, “Of course Harry. Your secrets are safe with me. You know that.” He nodded gratefully to her. After a moment, she voiced a question niggling in her brain. “Why’d you tell me?”

“What?” he asked, turning back toward her.

“You said that you’ve never told anyone about the cupboard before. So why me?”

“Oh,” he replied, scratching his head for a moment. “I don’t know, really. I wasn’t really thinking about it. Normally I don’t like to talk about the Dursleys. It makes me uncomfortable, so I just try to avoid any questions as best I can. But when it came up with you...” he spread his hands out in front of him in a helpless gesture. “I didn’t really feel the need to hide anything, I guess. I think I just find you easy to talk to. Like you won’t judge me or jump to conclusions or anything. And I know you won’t overreact or try to force me to open up and tell you more than I want to. I could never talk to Ron or Hermione about them because Ron would just get mad and blow up and Hermione would get analytical and want to dissect my life to help me move past it or some other such tripe.”

Harry looked up to find her staring at him. "I'm rambling again, aren't I?"

She shook herself out of her stupor. "Maybe a little bit." She smiled then, significantly lightening the mood. "Shall we head back then?"

"I suppose we should," he agreed. "We're probably already in for a lecture and some questioning for taking so long."

She giggled and replied, "You're probably right." The return trip passed by with some light-hearted chatter. Harry was glad for the change in conversation, and Ginny was silently beaming that Harry had chosen to confide in her.

The rest of the night passed by relatively quickly. When the pair returned to Gryffindor Tower, the fat lady just raised her eyebrow at them, but didn't comment. There was minimal comment about the length of their trek from their friends, for which they were both grateful. Before long, they were all heading up to their respective dormitories and to the realm of dreams. Harry endured an almost constant stream of teasing from Sirius that night when he told the man about the ball and who his date was. Harry barely reacted to any of Sirius's comments, much to the man's chagrin, but that didn't deter him from his quest.

Harry woke up the next morning in high spirits. After completing his morning jog, instead of heading directly into the castle to work out in the Room of Requirement, he stopped by Hagrid's hut to see if the friendly half-giant was up for some tea. Harry enjoyed catching up with his friend. Hagrid had jokingly asked him if he had managed to snag a date for the dance yet and was surprised when Harry told him that he had. Hagrid commended him on his good taste when Harry revealed who his date was to be.

The two spent half an hour catching up on each other's lives. Hagrid told him that Grawp had moved out of the forest. He was now living in a cave in some nearby mountains. Hagrid assured him that his half brother was catching onto English very quickly now and was capable of simple conversation. Harry talked a bit about his HA classes and

some of the problems that had cropped up, especially with Ron. Hagrid assured him that Ron would come around eventually. Harry could only hope that he was right.

After a short time, Harry excused himself and jogged back up to the castle. He headed directly to the Room of Requirement to put in his morning workout. After he finished up, he headed into the shower to clean himself up. He hoped that he wasn't too late to stop down in the Great Hall to eat a quick breakfast before they stopped serving. But if nothing else he knew he could always stop by the kitchens to pick something up. He was surprised when he came out of the shower room to find a red-haired witch sitting on a bench waiting for him.

"Hey Harry, I figured you'd be in here," she called out to him upon noticing his appearance.

Harry was glad that he had dressed fully before exiting the shower room. He wasn't used to having company. "Hey Gin. What brings you here?" he asked her curiously.

"When you didn't show up to breakfast, I figured you were running a little late on your workout routine, so I brought you some toast," she said, producing said toast wrapped up in a napkin.

"Thanks," he said, shooting her a bright smile. "I was worried that I might have missed breakfast." He walked toward her and gratefully accepted the stack of toast.

"Any time," she replied easily. "So how come you didn't make it to breakfast on time? You're not usually late. Did you sleep in?"

Harry swallowed his bite before replying, "No, I didn't sleep in at all. I stopped by Hagrid's after my jog. I thought about skipping the rest of my workout to go to breakfast, but I figured I could always swing by the kitchens if I did end up missing out."

"That was nice of you," she told him as he continued to devour his breakfast. "Hagrid absolutely adores you...talks about you all the time."

Harry turned startled green eyes toward Ginny. His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed another bite. "Really?"

"Uh huh," she replied. "I know it means the world to him when you visit him. Ron and Hermione too," she added as an afterthought.

"Huh," Harry remarked eloquently. "You know Hagrid is the first friend I ever had. He rescued me from the Dursleys the summer before my first year."

"What do you mean rescued?" Ginny interrupted with a dangerous glint in her eye.

Harry sat down beside her, his toast already devoured. "When letters began arriving from Hogwarts, the Dursleys never let me read them. They always destroyed them, usually in the fire, as soon as they came. Every day the amount of letters that came would increase. It drove my uncle crazy, literally. He boarded up the mail slot on our front door and bolted all the windows shut to prevent any from being delivered, but they always found a way into the house.

"He finally lost it one day and drove us all halfway across the country to escape the torrent of letters, but they followed everywhere we went. We finally ended up in this shack on an island in the middle of nowhere. It was freezing cold and in the middle of a bad storm, and the shack did little to protect us from the elements. I stayed awake that night because I was too cold to sleep, and I counted down to midnight, because the next day was my birthday. Shortly after the clock struck twelve, Hagrid knocked the door in."

"I bet your relatives loved that," she piped in with a giggle.

He smiled at her, grateful for her lightheartedness. "Of course. Uncle Vernon didn't know whether to be angry or frightened, so he fluctuated between threatening him and cowering in a corner of the room. Hagrid brought me a birthday cake, the first cake I'd ever gotten. And when Dudley tried to eat it, Hagrid gave him a pig's tail."

She laughed outright at that and urged him to continue, so he did. "He had to get it surgically removed in a muggle hospital. Hagrid left him with it. Any time Dudley sees a wizard now, he tries to cover his bottom with his hands to prevent it happening again. Only problem is that his bottom is much too big that he couldn't possibly cover the whole thing. But anyway, Hagrid whisked me away and took me to Diagon Alley to go shopping for my school supplies. And he bought me my first birthday present, Hedwig. I guess that's another reason why I'm so closed to her. She was the first gift I ever remember receiving."

Ginny reached a hand out to his knee and squeezed it reassuringly. "Hagrid was great. The only thing he forgot to do was explain to me how to get onto Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. But it was because of that mistake that I met your family, so I can't really hold it against him."

"I remember that," Ginny volunteered. "You were so shy, asking my mum how to get through. I remember wondering to myself why you were there all alone and where your family was. I thought you were the cutest thing." They both blushed faintly, but she continued without interruption. "Then my brothers told me who you were, and it was all over for me. I was already quite taken with you, but to hear that you were the Harry Potter, that shy little boy who had asked my mum for help. I felt so bad that you were all alone, and I wished that you would come back out so I could have been the one to wish you off. I thought that everyone deserved to be wished off by someone when they get on the train."

"I remember you, running after the train on the platform, laughing and crying as the twins told you they'd send you a toilet seat." They both chuckled at the memory. "Did you know they sent me a toilet seat at the end of the year when I was in the Hospital Wing, after the ordeal with the Sorcerer's Stone?"

"You're kidding?" she asked, erupting into peals of laughter.

"Nope," he replied honestly. "Dumbledore told me so when I woke up. He said that Madame Pomfrey confiscated it because she thought it wasn't very hygienic." They both got a good laugh out of that.

“When I saw you running after the train, I remember wishing that I had someone like that, someone who would miss me that I could write to.”

“How ironic, that we were both wishing for such similar things,” she stated.

“Yep, life can be funny that way,” Harry agreed.

“Why did you need to write the twins?” Ginny asked abruptly. He cocked an eyebrow at the sudden change of topic. “I meant to ask you last night,” she explained. “When you brought up the twins sending you a toilet seat, it popped back into my mind.”

“Ah,” he said, mulling over something. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you. This doesn’t go beyond us though, right?” She nodded to him, so he continued, “Officially, it was just a reply about their shop. They sent me an update on their first month of business yesterday morning. They actually seem to have done really well, so I wanted to offer my congratulations first and foremost.”

“But the real meat of the letter had nothing to do with the shop,” Ginny continued.

“I wouldn’t say it had nothing to do with it,” Harry replied mysteriously. “I shared a business proposition with them. It’s not in their usual line of work, but it’s actually not that far off either.”

“And what did that entail?” she prodded, leaning forward eagerly.

“Nosy little bugger, aren’t you?” he teased. She slapped his arm playfully in reply. He rubbed the spot gingerly playing up his injury. “Ouch. You don’t have to be so violent.” When she raised her arm again he held up his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright, I’ll get on with it, just don’t hit me again.” She laughed appreciatively, and he continued.

“The idea came to me after a conversation I had with Dumbledore. He mentioned that the twins had been trying to get into the Order

ever since they left school last Spring, but that he hadn't let them in yet. He said he's reluctant to let them in when they're still so young. When I was leaving his office, I thought to myself that even though the twins can be really immature, that they're really incredibly intelligent. If pushed in the right direction they could be a huge help to the war effort."

"So because Dumbledore and the Order are ignoring them, you're going to give them that push," Ginny stated more than asked.

"Exactly," Harry smiled at her. "I suggested that they put their creative genius to work creating items that could be useful for the Order. If their invisibility hats could be modified to make the whole body disappear, for example, that could be a huge advantage. Also, if they were able to create something similar to a firework, only instead of just shooting out colored lights, if they could shoot out spells, you could take out a room full of Death Eaters without putting anyone at risk."

"Those are some really good ideas," Ginny said approvingly.

"Thank you," Harry replied gratefully. "I figured that would be a decent start for them. And once they get into the idea, I'm sure they'll come up with some pretty useful inventions on their own. They could use their joke shop as a front of sorts. They'd still sell their existing product line, but instead of inventing new pranks, they could devote their time to coming up with items for the Order. And once they presented a couple of these items to members of the Order...."

"They'd have no choice but to let them in," Ginny finished for him.

"Exactly," Harry said brightly.

"That's brilliant, Harry."

"Nah, that was the easy part. The twins are the ones who will be stuck with the dirty work of actually creating this stuff," Harry explained.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Harry,” Ginny insisted. “You may not be the one doing the actual inventing, but without you, the idea may never have even come up.”

“What do you say we head over to my office and start your training early today?” Harry asked suddenly. “We’re already together and alone, so we won’t need to make any excuses to anybody. On second thought, we can just do it in here today, then meet everybody for lunch.”

“Sounds good, Harry,” she replied, shaking her head at his inability to take a compliment.

Normally Harry would have spent this time training himself, but he decided that it wouldn’t hurt to break up the monotony of his schedule a little bit. They wanted to keep these sessions secret, so if anyone wised up to the fact that the two of them were always missing at the same time on certain days out of the week, they might get suspicious. Then again, they were probably more likely to think them snogging in a broom cupboard than training to be animagi, but that was beside the point.

Harry just decided to postpone his own training until later in the day. They started with wingardium leviosa, as they had been working on for the past two sessions. Ginny continued to improve in her abilities. She was nowhere near the control that she possessed with a wand, but after an hour of work she was able to make the quill levitate pretty steadily for as long as she liked.

Harry told her that she would still need to work on improving her control, but that they should move on to another spell. She could practice that one on her own now. They decided it was probably best to move onto Transfiguration material, since their ultimate goal was based heavily in Transfiguration. Harry conjured a needle and instructed Ginny to transfigure it into a thimble.

She did it with her wand first, as Harry ordered, to feel the difference between the two types of magic. And Ginny was actually surprised to feel that there was a noticeable difference. She figured that her magic

would feel the same and that it was just her intent that would have to change to alter the spell, despite Harry's explanation to the contrary. But there was a difference: slight, but definitely there.

Ginny's progress on this project was a little quicker than it had been for her first wandless spell. At first she had called forth the magic to levitate the pin while telling it to change into a thimble. The result was that the pin just vibrated in its place. Harry guessed what she had done, and she sheepishly admitted that he was right. Her next attempt was a little more successful. The pin began to morph and change shape, but it never made it fully to a thimble. Somewhere along the way she lost her focus and was left with a deformed mess.

"And that's why we start small and not on our bodies," Harry had commented dryly, earning him another slap on the arm. She had a tendency to hit him in the exact same spot every time she did that, and it was actually starting to hurt a little, though he wasn't about to admit that to anyone.

By the time lunch arrived and the two departed to meet their friends in the Great Hall, Ginny had managed to make the transformation from pin to thimble and back to pin again a couple of times. She asked him if that meant they could go back to practicing the animagus transformation. Harry wasn't sure if she was being entirely serious, but he stressed to her the importance that she get a better understanding of how wandless magic works and the subtle differences in casting different spells before she tried anything on herself. He made her promise that she wouldn't try to make any changes to herself until he deemed her ready, to which she reluctantly relented.

The next day brought with it Harry's duo of double HA lessons. The BHA was picking up the pace. They were well on track to not only start, but probably finish Patronuses by the time the winter break set in. Harry would then basically repeat the lessons that he gave to the IHA this term to the BHA next term. He was glad that he had written up and organized his lessons for the IHA this term because it now saved him the trouble of doing it again next term for the BHA.

The IHA that day was primarily practicing the cutting curse, lacerus. It worked similarly to the severing charm, diffindo, but it was much more powerful. Used on a human, diffindo would leave only a thin, shallow wound. Lacerus, on the other hand, would penetrate more deeply, causing real damage to the victim. It was the first spell Harry had taught that could easily be considered lethal.

Harry did not take the curse lightly, and he made sure that none of his students did either. He had them each working in their own circle, protected by a shielding spell set to absorb the cutting curse should anybody misfire. He did not want any accidents in this class. Warding that many separate areas against a curse that powerful took something out of Harry, but he considered it a necessary precaution.

Even with that safeguard, Harry stressed to his class how dangerous the curse was. He impressed upon them the severity of the situation. This curse was not to be used lightly. One should only use it in a life or death situation, and even then you should be careful with it. You could intend to cut someone to injure them, maybe aim for their wand arm in an effort to essentially remove the threat of attack, but you could accidentally miss your mark and end up killing your target. You might even miss your target entirely, or they might dodge it, and if any innocent bystander was nearby, they could easily be maimed or killed. The atmosphere was grave after Harry's stern warnings, but they all practiced the curse diligently.

The mood remained heavy as the class shuffled out of the room at the end of the lesson. He hated to leave them all like that, but he knew that he had to make sure that they all took his warnings seriously. He noticed, much to his consternation, that Cho was not among the crowd of students on their way out. She remained behind, standing by herself, waiting for the room to clear out. Harry sent a look over to his group of five friends, the same group that had fought with him in the Department of Mysteries last June, which Hermione interpreted as she ushered the rest of them all out of the room to leave Harry to deal with Cho on his own. He had actually been silently pleading with his friends not to abandon him, but he knew deep down that it was better to get this out of the way as soon as possible.

As the door closed behind Hermione, Cho moved toward him. "That was an interesting lesson, Harry," she said softly and warmly.

"Thanks," he replied earnestly. "I just hope they all took my warnings seriously."

"I think that's a safe bet," she returned coyly.

"You think?" he asked.

"Oh yes," she assured him. "Couldn't you tell?"

"I was worried that maybe I was just seeing what I wanted to see," he told her honestly.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. There was no doubt in anyone's mind as to just how serious you were."

"Thanks," he replied, slightly relieved. "I was reluctant to even teach that curse, but I knew that I had to. It's useful to know in case you ever do get attacked and are forced to fight for your life. Sometimes stunning just isn't enough, especially when you have several attackers. They can just keep reviving each other, and you never gain any ground." He had learned that the hard way, but the only reason he was still even talking about it was to stall the inevitable. He knew why she was there and where she wanted the conversation to go; he just wasn't looking forward to it.

But that didn't stop her from going forward. "You did the right thing, Harry," she reassured him cheerfully. "So cheer up. Besides, there are much better things you should be focusing on, like the upcoming ball."

Harry groaned inwardly but maintained his polite exterior. "Yeah, I guess it doesn't really do to dwell on things you can't control."

"Exactly," she agreed brightly. "So is there anyone special you're looking to go with?" she asked suggestively.

“Yes,” he answered tiredly.

“And?” she questioned with a wide smile.

“I’m going with Ginny Weasley,” Harry said frankly, hoping she’d just drop it if he came out and said it.

“Yes, I heard about that,” she admitted. “You asked her to the ball to prove to her brother how easy it was to get a date. But I’m sure she’d understand, you know, if....” she trailed off slightly.

“If what, Cho?” Harry questioned warningly.

“Well, I was kind of hoping you and I could go together,” she explained slowly, completely ignoring his warning tone. “I’m sure that she’d understand if you told her that you don’t really want to go with her. I mean, you were just proving a point by asking her, and you didn’t know that Michael and I had broken up at the time.”

Harry wearily ran a hand down his face, bracing himself for what he was about to say and how she would react. “Look, Cho,” he said sternly, “I’m going to the ball with Ginny because I want to go with her, not to prove a point, and not as just some substitute for you.”

“But— but I thought you liked me,” Cho pouted accusingly, her eyes beginning to glisten.

“I did like you,” Harry admitted, “last year. I had a crush on you. But we tried getting together, and it didn’t work out. You’re a really nice girl, and I hope we can still be friends, but....”

“But we barely even went on a date,” Cho interrupted, tears still threatening.

“And look how our one attempt turned out,” Harry pointed out. “Look, we don’t even have that much in common. And the fact that you think I would even consider ditching Ginny to go to the ball with you shows just how little you know me. Even if I did want to go with you, I would

never just abandon someone like that, especially such a good friend. But the point is that I'm happy to be going with Ginny." Harry paused to take a breath and collect himself before continuing softly, "I'm not the right guy for you, Cho."

"Fine," she spat at him, angry tears streaking down her face, upsetting her mascara. "Have fun with your little friend at the stupid ball." She turned away from him and stormed toward the door. She stopped halfway to her destination, turned back to him, and yelled, "She probably can't even afford decent dress robes. I hope you enjoy showing up with the only girl wearing rags." With that said, she whirled back around and stomped out of the room. A loud boom echoed through the cavernous room as she slammed the door behind herself.

"Well, that went well," Harry muttered to himself as he mentally asked the room for some training dummies.

OoOoO

Ginny let herself be shepherded out of the room with the others. The four Gryffindors bade goodbye to Luna as they turned toward Gryffindor Tower. After they rounded the first corner, Ginny stopped in her tracks. The others noticed and turned to see what was the matter. "Ginny, what's wrong?" Hermione voiced the question on all their minds.

"I just remembered something I needed to ask Luna," she told them. "You guys go on, I'm gonna go try to catch her before she makes it to her common room." She turned and began jogging back the way they came.

"Ginny." Neville's voice stopped her as she was about to turn the corner. She looked back at her friends. "Do you want some company?"

"That's okay, Neville," she replied hastily. "It's kind of personal," she added when his face fell slightly.

“Oh,” he replied heavily. “Okay. See you later.”

“See you,” she called back over her shoulder as she hurried away.

She jogged down the corridor, but instead of running off to find Luna, she stopped in front of the door to the Room of Requirement and cracked it open a fraction, letting the voices carry out to her. It was Cho that she heard first. “You did the right thing, Harry. So cheer up. Besides, there are much better things you should be focusing on, like the upcoming ball.” Ginny rolled her eyes; apparently subtlety was not one of her strengths. She missed Harry’s reply, but she heard Cho’s next question quite clearly, “So is there anyone special you’re looking to go with?”

She listened as Harry replied quite shortly that there was someone he wanted to go with, only to have Cho try to weasel it out of him. Ginny smiled when he told her that he was going to the ball with her, but she could not believe what Cho said next. How dare she suggest that he just drop her? Ginny had been worried that Harry didn’t really want to go with her. She heard Friday evening that Cho and Michael had broken up, and that she had cornered him after dinner. She was concerned that he regretted his decision to ask her now that Cho was available again.

That was why she had questioned him about it on Friday night during their trip to the owlery. But even after he assured her that he wanted to go with her, Ginny still had lingering doubts that maybe she was just a second choice. She didn’t want him to feel like he had to go with her if he didn’t want to. But all of her doubts were expelled as she heard Harry’s response to Cho’s suggestion. Harry made it quite clear that he was going to the ball with whom he wanted to. He had admitted that even if that were not the case, he never would have ditched Ginny, which she had already guessed, but he insisted that he really did want to go to the ball with Ginny.

Satisfied, she began walking away. She did manage to catch Cho’s outbursts as they echoed through the hallway. She couldn’t believe what the girl said about her robes, but knew that there was at least some truth to the statement. She didn’t have money to buy the best

robes out there. She just hoped that with the money she saved up and whatever her mum was able to send her, that she'd be able to find something decent in Hogsmeade.

She had written home about the ball to her mum. That was the letter she sent out Friday night when she and Harry went out after curfew. She had managed to earn herself several galleons from the twins over the summer, and she still had most of that, but it was nowhere near enough to buy any of the dress robes in Gladrags. She might be able to buy something if it were on sale once her mum's money was added onto what she already had, but she had a feeling that she'd be looking around for a second-hand robe store come Hogsmeade weekend. She realized, as she walked back to the common room, that the Hogsmeade weekend was next weekend. It had really crept up on them.

She walked into the common room and had to endure Hermione's knowing looks, but luckily neither boy seemed to be aware of her deception. She supposed that she'd have to talk to Hermione later, whether she wanted to or not. But she really didn't mind all that much. There wasn't really much to hide, at least not anything that Hermione had any clue about. She and Harry were just friends. They were often both missing at the same time, which was bound to arouse suspicion, but as long as no one guessed the actual reason for it, she was fine with it. And she imagined that Harry was alright with that as well. They could just continue to tell everyone the truth, while completely avoiding the actual issue.

Hermione never got a chance to talk to Ginny alone before dinner arrived because she spent most of that time working on a potions essay. And Hermione was not one to interrupt anyone's studies. To her that was a sacred time. Harry never came back to the common room, but that was hardly a surprise. She assumed that he was either reading or doing his own training. The only actual training she had ever seen him at was his morning workout, but she knew that there was more to it than that, though he never actually said as much.

He disappeared for large periods of time, and she noticed that he didn't seem to be going to his office all of those times. She had a feeling that he went to the Room of Requirement, but she never

actually brought herself to follow him to find out. That was his business as far as she was concerned. She would know if he decided to tell her and not before. But that didn't stop her from speculating.

She worried that Hermione would catch onto the same clues that she was finding, but the older girl seemed pretty preoccupied with her studies lately. She was almost always in the library, and when she wasn't, she was still buried in a book. Ginny struggled to understand how Hermione could study so much without going crazy. But then again, studying was fun for Hermione, so maybe it was different.

And she figured as long as no one else noticed where he was going, they would all assume he was just studying. From what she heard, he was easily acing all of his classes, even giving Hermione a run for her money. She had seen Hermione offering help to Harry several times, only to have him politely refuse. She was surprised the first time this happened, but she figured that Harry was probably always smart enough to do well in his classes. He just never applied himself in the past. That seemed to have changed this year.

It puzzled her, really. Sometimes she felt like he was just throwing himself into everything, constantly keeping busy, just so he wouldn't have to stop and think about his life or anything that was going on in the world. But then other times, she got the feeling that he thought a lot about it. And there had even been a couple moments where he revealed things to her that he said he hadn't told anybody else. So it's not like he was completely avoiding things. And he seemed to be happy, for the most part. Granted there were times when everything caught up with him, she could see it in his eyes at times. She saw it earlier that day during the HA class. They all saw it.

But by the time he met them all for dinner, he was back to his lively self. She, like Hermione, assumed that there was plenty that he was keeping secret from them, that he was carrying a burden much heavier than any of them had ever had to carry, but he carried it well as far as she was concerned. If it ever got to be too much for him, she would be there for him. But until then, she was content to let him keep his secrets.

Hermione was not as understanding. She constantly brought up the issue, trying to push Harry to open up. Sometimes Ginny just wanted to smack her upside the head and tell her to shut her damn mouth. Okay, so maybe that would be a little harsh, but Hermione really didn't have a clue when to stop. All she was succeeding in doing was further isolating her friend and making him feel entirely uncomfortable. The more Hermione pushed, the more Harry pulled away.

It pained her to see their relationship suffering like that, but there was not much she could do about it. Hermione refused to relent. And she knew Harry would not cave in, and she respected him for that. He wouldn't let anyone pressure him into doing anything he was uncomfortable doing. Ginny had tried on a couple of occasions to convince Hermione to let it be for the sake of her friendship with Harry, but the older girl had insisted that it was for his own good. So Ginny could only sit back and watch and give Harry her silent encouragement, a reassuring smile here and there. And most of all she would just be there for him to talk to whenever he was ready.

Hermione snagged her after dinner before she could get settled and whisked her up the girls' dormitory and into the 6th years' room. After verifying that the room was empty, Hermione dragged Ginny by the arm over to her bed and sat down, patting the space next to her for Ginny to fill. The second Ginny's bottom hit the bed, Hermione started in on the interrogation.

"What's going on between you and Harry?"

"What, no hello? No, how's it going Ginny?" she returned teasingly. Hermione just arched an eyebrow in response. "We're going to the ball together as friends."

"Well everyone knows that," Hermione replied condescendingly. "I want to know what's really going on between you two."

"What makes you think there's anything going on?" Ginny fired back.

"Oh come on," Hermione tutted, "I'm not stupid, you know. Ron's not the only one who's noticed that you've been disappearing a lot lately."

And Harry's always conveniently missing at the same time as well. I hardly think that's coincidence."

"Harry and I are just friends," Ginny calmly explained to her bushy haired friend.

"But you're not denying that you're spending time with him," she pointed out.

"Friends do tend to spend time together every so often," Ginny retorted.

"Yes, but why is it that no one else ever seems to know where you are whenever you and Harry disappear together?" Hermione inquired. She really was a nosy bugger.

"I don't know. Maybe nobody pays attention," Ginny speculated.

"Oh come on," Hermione exclaimed. "Listen Ginny, I know you've had a crush on Harry for like forever." Ginny moved to interrupt, but Hermione held up a hand and pushed on. "Oh, I know you gave up waiting on him a long time ago, but that's very different from getting over him now, isn't it? I just don't think now is the time to be starting up a relationship with him. He's going through a fragile time right now and is likely to be extremely vulnerable. He might cling to you just because you treat him like nothing's wrong, but it's not healthy for him. He needs to come to terms with what happened with Sirius and what's going on in the world around him. I don't think now is the right time to get involved."

"You are unbelievable," Ginny returned hotly. "How dare you accuse me of any such thing?"

"I'm not trying to accuse you of anything," Hermione attempted to soothe her red-haired friend. "I know that you care for Harry and that you want to be there for him, but you can't coddle him and let him keep pretending like nothing is wrong. You either need to get him to open up or back off a little. Offering him another means of escape is just not healthy for him right now."

“And trying to force your will upon others is not very conducive to your friendships,” Ginny retorted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means exactly what I said,” Ginny explained fiercely. “You can’t force Harry to open up to you or to tell you all of his secrets. You need to let him come to you on his own terms. He needs to be able to trust that you won’t push him for more than he’s willing to give.”

“Harry would never open up to anybody if we didn’t push him,” Hermione protested ardently. “He’s a very private person. But he needs help dealing with this. He can’t do it alone, so we need to get him to open up. And it’s kind of hard to do when I’m the only one who’s trying while everyone else just pretends like everything is just peachy.”

“Maybe the rest of us just respect Harry enough to give him his privacy,” Ginny replied a bit more civilly. “Merlin, Hermione. You just keep pushing him and pushing him, and he keeps retreating further and further away from you. When are you going to get it? You’re ruining your friendship with him. He actually dreads having to talk to you because he knows it’s only a matter of time before you try to force him to talk. You may be trying to get him to open up, but all you’re succeeding in doing is closing him off to you.”

“That’s just because people like you and Ron let him just pretend like nothing’s wrong. You may think you’re helping him out by giving him space, but that’s not what he needs right now. He needs his friends to help him through these tough times. He’ll never let us help him unless we make him,” Hermione was pleading with her to see things her way.

“And what makes you an expert on what Harry needs?” Ginny asked.

“I’ve been his best friend for the last five years. I know as much about Harry as anyone else and more than most,” Hermione

explained, trying to remain patient but failing slightly. "You may have been practically obsessed with him these past five years, but you've only recently started talking to him. He avoids talking about anything that makes him uncomfortable like it's the plague. He's hardly ever said anything about his relatives or his life before Hogwarts. The only reason we know half as much about his life there as we do is because Ron, Fred, and George went to pick him up that one time they locked him in his room all summer and the time that your dad and the three of them picked him up the summer before our fourth year.

"Any time any of us bring up his relatives, he avoids giving concrete answers and changes the subject as quickly as possible. He refuses to tell any of us anything about them or about his life outside of Hogwarts. He always just says things are fine. I'm fine. The Dursleys are treating me fine. But we know they don't, and I know he's not. So please, just listen to what I've said. If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. I either need you to help me or to back off, but you can't keep coddling him," Hermione finished with watery eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I know that you love Harry and that you mean well, but you're going about this all wrong. I can't support what you're doing, and I'm not backing off," Ginny replied honestly, wishing she could tell her friend what Harry had recently revealed to her about his life with the Dursleys before Hogwarts. "Harry needs someone who will offer him unconditional support, and he's not getting it from you. He's definitely not going to get it from Ron. I intend to be there for him for as long as he'll have me. This isn't about fulfilling some stupid childhood fantasy where I end up with Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry's my friend, and I intend to help him in any way he needs me whenever he needs me. But I'm not going to force him to open up to me before he's ready to. And I'm begging you to reconsider what you're doing, before you ruin the friendship that you two have."

"When he finally breaks down," Hermione said, her frustration mounting, "you'll know who to blame."

"If he breaks down or needs to talk, I'll be there for him, should he want me there," Ginny said in a forced calm.

“How can you just sit back and wait for him to fall apart?” Hermione questioned heatedly.

“First of all, you’re assuming that he will fall apart, and I’m not so sure I agree with you on that account. Second of all, I’ve had someone else’s will forced upon me before,” Ginny replied frigidly, her eyes flashing dangerously, “and I’m not about to subject anyone else to that. Now if you’ll excuse me,” she continued, standing, “I’m heading back downstairs.” She strode to the door, exited, and returned to the common room, leaving Hermione alone, still sitting on her bed.

OoOoO

As the next week started up, the student population was chattering excitedly on two topics: the Yule Ball and the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend. Despite their distracted students, the professors continued to plow through their lessons, assigning out copious amounts of homework, especially to those who were struggling with the concepts, which, in Harry’s classes, was pretty much everyone except him and Hermione. But even they had their fair share of essays to write at this point in the term.

In Transfiguration, they were focusing on conjuring complex objects right now. Harry and Hermione were both ahead of the class, already progressing to conjuring multiple objects at the same time. After that, there was only permanent conjuration to cover before they moved on to the next subject. Most conjured objects would disappear or dissubstantiate after a period of time. It took a great deal of concentration and magical power to conjure something that would last for an extended period of time. It was unknown if anything could truly be conjured permanently, but it was possible to conjure something that would last for years, though the skill was not common. The average witch or wizard could conjure a moderately simple object that would last up to a couple months before it vanished.

Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures classes had actually been relatively tame thus far, for which Harry was eternally grateful. They

had spent a couple weeks studying phoenixes, with Fawkes being a regular guest to the class. Harry took great interest in these lessons and was pleased when Fawkes spent as much time on his shoulder as he did on Hagrid's. Harry wished he could talk to Fawkes the way he could Hedwig, but he remembered what she had told him about the magical creatures. She had explained to him that all magical creatures can mindspeak, but not all creatures understood human languages. She went on to say that phoenix's had a language all their own, unknown to any other creature.

Harry continued to excel in Potions class, much to Snape's consternation. The man had backed off his snide comments during class slightly, seeming to lose interest at Harry's lack of response. The Slytherins in class still occasionally tried to ruin his potions, but they had yet to succeed. His potions weren't usually up to the standard of a potion's master like Snape, but they were more than adequate for the class. Harry usually managed an Acceptable, which by Snape's exacting standards combined with his bias against Gryffindors in general and Harry in particular, he took to be somewhere between and Exceeds Expectations and Outstanding. Harry was just glad that Snape had no part in the actual grading for NEWTs.

They rarely covered anything new in DADA. Most of the stuff he had already covered in his HA classes, and almost all of the rest he had learned on his own at some point. But Harry understood that not everyone had all the extra training that he and his friends received, so he couldn't hold it against his professor. The class was just a cake walk for him.

That left just Charms class left. Right now they were going over animating charms. Each student was given a little toy doll, much like a muggle action figure, that they were to animate to walk across their desks. Most people in the class were struggling to get their dolls to move at all. Hermione's doll was able to walk back and forth relatively smoothly. When no one else was looking, Harry's doll would tiptoe across the edge of his desk or else run laps. He kept such theatrics private though, and kept the doll simply walking about whenever eyes turned upon him.

Harry seemed to have a sixth sense about that. He could always tell whenever someone was looking at him. It was an ability he had always had, but it seemed to have become more pronounced in the past year. It had other uses than allowing him to play around with dolls during classes. It had kicked in several times when Draco Malfoy had been lingering nearby, and he had a feeling that the blonde haired boy was keeping an extremely close eye on him, closer than was normal for him. He had a feeling that the blonde had been ordered to keep an eye on him, but there wasn't much Harry could do about it except be careful about what he did or said in his presence.

Harry met with his Headmaster on Thursday once again to practice Occlumency. It went to similar results as the last time. The Headmaster poked around his barriers for an inordinate amount of time, then attacked rapidly and precisely, tearing a whole and entering his mind. He once again allowed himself to be pushed out without a fight. The two talked for a little while, and the Headmaster explained that Harry must reinforce his shields against pinpoint assaults, not just general battering. His shield was only as strong as its weakest point.

Before Harry left his office, Dumbledore informed Harry that there would be several aurors and Order members in Hogsmeade over the weekend. He warned Harry that if he noticed anything suspicious, he was to notify one of them immediately and not do anything dangerous. Harry only nodded his agreement before exiting.

The next day, Harry was recruited by Professor Caldwell yet again to help grade essays. This time they were third years' essays that he needed by Wednesday morning. Harry told him it would not be a problem. That night, after dinner, Harry was walking back to Gryffindor Tower and spotted Ginny ahead of him, talking to one of her dorm mates whom he thought was named Melissa. He could just barely make out their conversation.

"...Gladrags tomorrow?" asked Melissa.

"I guess...have enough. I'll just have to hope something's on sale. I only have 10 galleons....", Ginny said back somewhat dejectedly.

“I’m sure we’ll find something,” her friend encouraged.

Harry hung back and thought about it, Cho’s departing words ringing in his ears. It wasn’t that he minded what Ginny wore to the ball. He could really care less whether she was wearing the latest fashion or if she was wearing something ten years out of date. He didn’t even know what was in fashion. But he didn’t want Ginny to have to worry about it. He knew she probably wouldn’t accept any “charity” from him, and he would never dare to offer to buy her robes, because he didn’t want her to think that it mattered to him. That would just be a disaster waiting to happen.

An idea slowly started to form in his head. He already planned to head to town early the next day to make certain arrangements. One quick stop along the way couldn’t hurt. And so Harry’s friends were all surprised the next morning, when he inhaled a quick breakfast and told them he’d meet them in town, before beating a hasty retreat.

Harry covered the sunny grounds quickly, barely taking the effort to notice the changing color of the leaves adorning the trees and lining the path. He had to squint as he walked swiftly towards the gates as the morning sun was still somewhat low in the sky. It was a brisk morning, the fall weather beginning to settle in. If not for warming charms, Harry would have dreaded his morning time runs. He didn’t have a pair of pants to work out in, though he suspected he could get away with a pair of jeans if push came to shove. He had almost slapped himself when he began fretting over that predicament, only to realize that a warming charm made the change in clothing unnecessary.

Harry’s hair fanned out behind him as a gust of wind picked up. It was still a bit chilly, but not uncomfortably so. He covered the distance to the town in very little time. His first stop was Gladrags Wizardwear. He noticed that the shop was advertising dress robes heavily in its windows. Apparently they had heard about the upcoming ball and were looking to do some business this weekend.

Harry entered the shop and looked around for the proprietor, but the store looked to be empty. He walked through the different racks of

robes and came to a section of footwear, more specifically socks. Figuring it was never too early to begin Christmas shopping, Harry looked for the most outrageous socks he could find. He found some lewd orange and brown swirled socks and a pair of shockingly yellow socks with magenta polka dots. Before he walked away, he remembered something Dumbledore had once told him in his first year, and grabbed a couple pairs of thick woolen socks as well.

When he turned around, he noticed that the shop owner had appeared while he was distracted. Harry walked determinedly up to the older witch. She looked over at him and smiled, "You're here early. Can I help you, dear?"

"Yes," Harry replied politely, nodding his head as he stopped several feet in front of her. "I would like to purchase these socks, and I was hoping you might be able to do me a favor."

"Well the first part shouldn't be a problem," she said easily. "But I'm afraid I'll have to hear what you need before I agree to do you any favors, Mr...?"

"Potter," Harry hastily inserted. "Harry Potter."

Her eyes did the usual flick to his scar, as if she needed confirmation that he was indeed who he claimed. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter," she finally said, somewhat flustered.

"Please, just Harry," Harry insisted.

"Very well then, Harry. What was that favor you were asking about?"

"Well, it's like this," he began. "I'm sure you know about the ball that's coming up." She nodded affirmative. "Well I have a date for the ball. Her family isn't the wealthiest, and I overheard her talking with one of her friends, saying she was worried that she wouldn't be able to afford decent robes. I could care less what robes she wears; she could show up in her school robes for all I care. But I don't want her to have to worry about it, so I was trying to think of a way I could help her."

“I don’t think she’d let me buy her robes,” Harry explained. “And I think even suggesting it would land me in a spot of trouble. So I thought you might be able to help me out. Sometime today, Ginny Weasley is going to come into this shop looking at robes. She said that she only had about 10 galleons to spend, so when she finds something she likes, I was wondering if you could just tell her that it’s on sale and charge her around 9 galleons for it. I’ll pay the remaining cost, of course.”

The older woman seemed to be thinking over what he had told her. She held her hand to her chin and was looking above Harry’s right shoulder. Her gaze focused back onto him as she asked, “What does she look like?”

Harry smiled. “She has long red hair, lots of freckles, and is probably about this tall,” he informed her holding his hand somewhere around the level of his chin. “So does that mean you’ll help me?”

“I think I’ll require some insurance, just to make sure that you don’t forget to stop back in and pay the rest of the cost,” she said.

“Oh, of course,” Harry hastily replied. “That’s not a problem. How much do you want? How much is your most expensive robe here?”

She thought it over for a minute. “Well our most expensive dress robes for this type of occasion cost about 55 galleons, but....”

“No problem,” Harry interrupted. He took out his money bag, spoke “50 galleons,” and dumped the contents on the nearby counter. “That should more than cover the cost of whatever robes she picks out, with her 9 galleons added, and you can keep the rest for your trouble and your kindness in helping me out.”

“That’s really not necessary, Mr. Potter,” she blurted out, wide eyed.

“It’s Harry,” he corrected. “And it’s really not a problem. I have more money than I know what to do with, and I really do appreciate your

help. She's a very good friend of mine, and I'd just hate to see her worrying needlessly over something like this."

"It's my pleasure. Now you can consider those socks of yours on the house." Harry was about to speak up when she held up a hand to silence him. "I won't have any complaints. Together they wouldn't set you back much more than a galleon, and even if your lady friend picked out the most expensive robes here, you've still given me enough that with her 9 galleons, I'd still make out better than I should be. Now I won't take no for an answer."

"Thanks," he told her sincerely, with a smile firmly planted across his face, distinctly satisfied with how this visit was playing out.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you," she sang cheerfully.

"Likewise," Harry called over his shoulder, already reaching for the door. He exited the shop and headed further into town. His next stop was to be the Three Broomsticks. When he entered the familiar pub, he was almost surprised to find it nearly empty. It's not that he had been expecting a large crowd or anything. In fact, he knew that there wouldn't be many people there. But he was not used to seeing it without a crowd of students filling it.

He had looked into the pub briefly over the summer when he was first exploring in his owl form, but he had not actually entered the bar at the time, and he had only briefly glanced inside the one time. After the first time, he had mostly steered clear of the town, not wanting to risk being spotted. He didn't know if it was possible to tell if an animal was actually an animagus, but he guessed that if it was possible, somebody like Dumbledore or Moody would probably be able to do it. With Hogwarts close by, running into Dumbledore could always be a risk in the town. And Harry didn't know where Moody might be, considering that he worked for the Order. He could theoretically be anywhere.

Harry shook himself out of his thoughts and strode up to the bar. Madame Rosmerta, the barmaid and owner of the tavern, was currently serving one of the two men who were sitting at the bar.

Harry hopped up onto one of the bar stools to wait, his eyes wandering the room idly. He hadn't been waiting long when a melodious voice broke him out of his reverie. "What can I get you, sweetie?"

Harry turned to find Rosmerta leaning slightly over the bar directly in front of him. He caught an eyeful of...some of her assets and realized that she must've been drop dead gorgeous when she was younger. Heck, she was still gorgeous, he admitted to himself, even though she was well older than his parents. He didn't allow his eyes to linger as he brought them up to her round face and locked with her honey colored eyes.

"I was wondering if you sold butterbeer in bulk," Harry asked her.

"What did you have in mind?" she replied, pushing herself up and off the bar. She grabbed a dish rag and began wiping a glass lazily as she observed him.

"Well, we have a Quidditch match coming up," Harry explained to her, eyes never leaving her warm face, "and it is customary to have a party afterwards, assuming we win of course." The last was added on almost as though he thought it somewhat unnecessary. "In the past, the Weasley twins— I'm sure you remember them—"he smirked at her and she chuckled in response as he continued. "They have always provided Gryffindor with plenty of butterbeer and a variety of food. I'm sure I can get the house elves to provide some food for us, but I'm at a loss for the butterbeer."

"Well, I might be able to set you up with a couple kegs," she began, setting the glass and rag down on the bar. "Mind you that they're not exactly cheap...."

"I've got plenty of money," Harry interrupted.

She smiled at him warmly. "And I'm guessing you're trying to keep this a secret...?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?" he asked curiously.

“Well, I usually don’t see students in here quite so early,” she explained. “And when I do they’re usually not alone,” she added mischievously.

“Oh,” Harry blushed faintly. “Right, I guess it is kind of obvious.”

“Just a bit,” she teased. “I’m not sure how you’ll get them into the castle without all your friends seeing. I can’t exactly owl them to you, so you’ll have to take them up on your own.”

“That’s not a problem,” Harry waved away her concern. “I can just stick the kegs in my trunk.”

She raised an eyebrow at him at that. So he took out his trunk from his pocket and nonchalantly removed the shrinking charm. It expanded to its full size in front of them. “I’ve got plenty of room in here, and it’ll never get too heavy.”

“That’s an impressive piece of wood,” she said suggestively, winking at Harry.

Harry turned a beet red, not missing the not so hidden meaning. “Madame Rosmerta. If I didn’t know better,” he commented in as normal a voice as he could manage, “I’d swear you were flirting with me.”

She chuckled appreciatively, her laughter taking on an almost musical quality. “So how many kegs will it be then, Mr. Potter?”

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “How many do you think I’ll need for all of Gryffindor Tower?”

She thought about it for half a minute. “You might be able to get by with two. But if you want to be safe, you should go with three. Even if you don’t use it all, I doubt you’d complain at having extra butterbeer left over.”

“Good point,” Harry agreed. “Three it is, then.”

She smiled at him and disappeared into a back room for a moment. A minute later, she walked back out with three kegs trailing behind her. "It's normally 20 galleons a keg, but you look so cute, I'll let you have them for 50 galleons."

"You'll find that flattery gets you everywhere," Harry replied flirtatiously, surprised at his own daring. He took out his money bag and spoke "Sixty galleons," then dumped the contents in front of her.

"I think I said 50, Harry," she scolded playfully.

"I know what you said," Harry said back mischievously. "But if you're going to drop the price ten galleons because I'm cute, it's only fair that I raise it at least as much to account for your beauty."

"You little charmer," she smirked at him. "What happened to the shy little boy that was coming in here just a couple years ago?"

"He grew up," Harry shrugged.

"So he has," she purred at him, giggling slightly.

Harry managed to control his blush relatively well. "You must drive all the boys crazy," he told her.

"Well, I try," she said with a wink.

Harry laughed outright. "I better take these kegs and get out before you corrupt me any more."

"Hey," she pouted, picking up her discarded rag and slapping him on the arm with it. "I am not corrupting you. I'm just teaching you to flirt properly."

"My mistake," Harry relented, still grinning widely. He loaded the three kegs into his trunk before turning back to the matron. "It was a pleasure doing business with you," Harry told her, mimicking the line he had heard not a half an hour earlier.

“The pleasure was all mine, Harry,” she returned.

“I’m sure I’ll see you later today,” Harry told her, as he shrunk his trunk and returned it to his pocket while walking toward the door.

“I’ll look forward to it,” he heard as he left the tavern.

Shaking his head and with a smile on his face, Harry headed back in the general direction of Hogwarts hoping to meet up with his friends. He caught up with Hermione, Ron, and Neville as they were walking into the town. They told him that Ginny was off with some of her friends from her year shopping for dress robes. Harry smirked but didn’t comment.

“Where’s Luna?” he then asked, noticing that she too was absent from the group. The three friends all looked at each other for a moment, then looked back at Harry sheepishly. Apparently none of them had thought to ask the sole Ravenclaw of their group what she was doing during the visit. Harry hoped that perhaps Ginny had thought to ask the blonde Ravenclaw what her plans were. “We’ll just have to keep an eye out for her,” Harry commented.

The four of them set off to enjoy their day away from the castle. Harry received several questions about his odd behavior and why he had wanted to get into town so early, but he dodged all the questions. They would find out about his dealings at the Three Broomsticks in due time, and he hoped that no one ever found out about the deal he struck with the Gladrags owner.

Hermione insisted on visiting Scrivenshaft’s to replenish her supply of quills and parchment. Harry also purchased some extra equipment, figuring it didn’t hurt to have spare supplies. Ron overruled Hermione’s next choice of stops, the bookstore, claiming that since Hermione chose their last stop, it was only fair that someone else choose the next one. So the quartet headed into Honeydukes to stock up on sweets. Harry didn’t buy much candy. He never acquired much of a sweet tooth, never having been exposed to candy until he entered the Wizarding World.

He bought a package of chocolate frogs, but that was all. He didn't get the appeal of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. More than half of the beans turned out to be something Harry would never willingly eat. Sugar quills weren't bad. They were pure, flavored sugar, but Harry wasn't accustomed to such a high amount of sugar intake. It was too rich for him. He preferred to just have a little bit of chocolate around in case he had a taste for some.

Hermione was more or less in the same boat as Harry. Her parents were dentists, so it made sense that she would also avoid sugary treats. Neville picked out a couple different treats, but he didn't overdo it. Ron, on the other hand, seemed determined to walk out of the store with as much candy as he could afford, while still saving a little bit for some dung bombs from Zonko's. He had chocolate frogs, every flavor beans, ice mice, sugar quills, licorice wands, chocoballs, and pepper imps. That's only taking into account what Harry noticed of Ron's purchases. Harry was actually mildly surprised that Ron had enough money for all of it.

When they left, Hermione got her wish, and they headed toward the bookshop. Harry found that he didn't mind the stop as much as he had in the past, given his new taste for reading. He didn't even really need any more books. He still had several books of his own collection he had yet to touch, and the library at Hogwarts held a wealth of knowledge in it. But he wasn't averse to browsing the shelves to see if anything caught his eye. And indeed, a couple books did manage to tickle his fancy: one on wards that he had never seen before, another on battle field healing, and yet another on Legilimency. Harry hadn't really considered studying that art in the past, but he figured it couldn't hurt to at least read about the basics. It might even help him better understand Occlumency by understanding how Legilimency works.

Harry almost pulled out his trunk and stuffed his purchases inside it without thinking. He wasn't sure why he was keeping that particular secret, but he just didn't want to let his friends know about that acquisition, so he settled for carrying everything in bags like everyone else. When they eventually managed to drag Hermione out, their next stop was Zonko's so that Ron could stockpile on dung bombs. Harry

didn't understand his friend's fascination with the smelly balls, but every time they went to Hogsmeade, Ron would buy some.

Nobody had anywhere else they needed to go, so the group headed to the Three Broomsticks to get a butterbeer and some lunch. The four friends grabbed a table in the middle of the pub and placed their orders with Madame Rosmerta, who continued to be extra friendly with Harry, much to his amusement. The looks on his friends' faces as the two flirted was priceless.

Their food had just been served when the doors to the pub burst open, revealing a beaming Ginny highlighted by the sunlight filtering in behind her. She glanced around the room, locked her eyes on their table, and bounded her way over to them. She pulled up a chair between Harry and Neville. "Hey guys," she hailed as she reached over to snag some crisps from Harry's as yet untouched plate of food.

"Hey." "Hi Ginny." "Hi." Three voices greeted in return all at once.

"Hey Gin," Harry added. "How's it going?"

She turned and beamed at him. "Great, Harry. How about you?"

"I'm doing pretty well, myself," he replied cheerfully, watching as Ginny grabbed another handful of crisps from his plate. "Little hungry there?"

"A bit," she admitted unrepentantly in between bites.

"Well I'm glad I could be of some help," Harry retorted, arching an eyebrow and grinning at her.

"Good," she returned. "I'm glad you don't mind." She reached over and grabbed some more.

"You shouldn't just snack on crisps," Harry informed her. "You'll want to eat something a little more substantial." Harry glanced over Ginny's shoulder to Madame Rosmerta, whom he noticed had been watching their exchange. He signaled to her to bring him another

plate as he slid his own in front of Ginny, knowing that she probably did not have enough money left to buy herself a full meal.

Ginny continued to glow as she gave Harry a smile in thanks. She then began to eat in earnest. Harry took that moment to glance around the table and realized that they were the center of attention. His friends all looked amused. Not a full minute later, Rosmerta was leaning over Harry, one hand on his shoulder, the other placing a fresh plate before him. "There you are, Harry," she said smilingly, giving his shoulder a slight squeeze.

"Thanks Rosie," Harry returned with a lopsided smile. She gave him a wink before turning and tending to another table full of patrons.

"Rosie?" Hermione repeated incredulously. Ron held a pained and almost wistful expression, his eyes remaining on Rosmerta's backside. Neville just looked like he was enjoying a show. Ginny remained eating, showing only a casual interest in what was going on around her.

"What?" Harry asked, as he began eating from his new plate.

"What's with you?" Hermione continued. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were just flirting with her."

"And so what if I was?" Harry returned.

"She's old enough to be your mother," she retorted indignantly, waving her hands in front of her face. "She's even older than your mother would be..." she trailed off as she realized what she was saying and clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she hastily apologized. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Probably not," Neville agreed with her.

Harry just shrugged at her. "I'm just having fun," Harry explained himself half heartedly, ignoring the comment about his mother. "It's not like either of us is taking it seriously."

“But you don’t flirt,” Hermione commented, mostly to herself.

“That’s not true,” Ginny inserted. She turned and winked at Harry, who laughed at the gesture.

“Well I’ve never seen you flirt before,” Hermione continued.

“Well I’m not about to flirt with you,” Harry remarked unconsciously.

Hermione’s face took on a hurtful expression and Ron’s looked a little indignant as his gaze shifted onto Harry. “And just why not?” Hermione demanded.

Harry quickly realized his mistake. “Hermione,” he said as he held up a placating hand, “you’re more like a sister to me than anything else.”

That was all it took. Ron smirked widely as he transferred his attention to Hermione. Her features made a rapid conversion from hurt to touched. Unshed tears sprang into her eyes as she almost whimpered, “Oh Harry,” before launching out of her chair to hug him.

Harry, after hesitating a moment, tentatively returned the gesture, perhaps a bit stiffly. He had to casually spit out a piece of Hermione’s bushy hair that had managed to make its way into his open mouth in his surprise at her reaction to his statement. He looked over her shoulder at his three other friends. Ron’s wistful expression seemed to have returned, though he was smiling behind it. Neville gave him a thumbs up to go with his smirk. When he met Ginny’s eyes, she winked again and mouthed “smooth.”

Harry mouthed a “thank you” in return. He then patted Hermione a couple times on the back and slowly extricated himself from her embrace. She smiled at him, her eyes still sparkling, as she pulled away.

The rest of the meal went pretty smoothly. Luna wandered in not long afterwards, and the group welcomed her to their table wholeheartedly. They spent a good hour just sitting around chatting over butterbeers before making their leave. Madame Rosmerta had conveniently left

his second plate of food off his bill, but Harry paid the cost anyway. He winked at Madame Rosmerta on his way out, wondering what her reaction would be when she noticed the extra money he had left behind.

They wandered around town for a little longer, but didn't make any more stops. Soon enough, they were making their way back up to Hogwarts. As they traversed the weathered path, Hermione and Ron were in the middle of one of their typical arguments. Harry didn't even know what this one was about, nor did he really think it mattered. Luna was telling Neville about some creature of her own imagination. The expression on his face as he listened was hilarious.

Harry was watching Neville's facial expressions in open amusement as he felt a nudge at his side. He looked over and found the disturbance to be none other than Ginny Weasley, her mane of red hair flowing behind her in the gentle afternoon breeze. "Hey," she said.

"Hey Gin, did you have fun in town today?" he asked her, already knowing the answer. She had not exactly hidden her enjoyment. Indeed, she had not stopped smiling since she first entered the Three Broomsticks.

"Uh huh," she replied. "You?"

"Yep, I had a great time," Harry replied. "Good company," he added, giving her a playful nudge.

"Oh I'm sure," she retorted. "Although I'm sure you were sad to leave behind your precious Rosie."

"Well, now that you mention it...." Harry played along.

"You know, if you wanted to take her to the ball, I wouldn't hold it against you," she teased. "I don't want to stand in the way of anything."

“Aww,” Harry laughed, “that’s sweet of you, really. But you’re not weaseling out of our date that easily. I’m afraid you’re quite stuck with me.”

“Pity,” she mock pouted. Then she abruptly changed the subject. “I don’t think I ever really thanked you for lunch today.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Harry replied automatically, waving the matter off. “It was nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing,” she insisted. “It was very sweet of you, especially to just give up your own plate of food without any fanfare. Most guys would try to draw attention to the fact to take credit for their generosity or whatever, but you just do it without even thinking about it. In truth, I didn’t have enough money to cover lunch. I found some dress robes at Gladrags that I was barely able to afford, and I didn’t really think about what I would do for lunch at the time. You saved me from going on in hunger, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry replied. “So you found some dress robes, huh?” Harry was surprised to find that he was actually curious about what her robes looked like.

“Uh huh, I really like them a lot,” she practically gushed. “It’s lucky they were on sale; otherwise I never would have been able to get them.”

“So what color are they?” Harry asked her.

She opened her mouth as though she were about to reply, then closed it and glanced sharply at him. “You’ll find out at the ball, Mr. Potter. I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise for you.”

“Awww,” Harry pouted. “Please? I am your date, after all. Don’t I get some sort of special privileges for that?”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “I would have thought taking me to the ball would be privilege enough.” She adopted an air of superiority that Harry thought would have been fitting on a princess.

He grasped her hand, dropped onto one knee and looked up into her face. He was struck momentarily by the sight that beheld him. The sun was shining behind her, beginning its decent, creating a halo-like aura around her. His breath hitched at the beauty of it. His words that were initially meant to be entirely playful came out much more seriously than he had originally intended. "Forgive me, my lady. I never meant to imply otherwise. I am deeply honored to be taking you to the ball." He capped off the performance by holding her hand to his lips and planting a small kiss just below her knuckles.

She brought her other hand up to her mouth as she swooned playfully, then she began giggling as she tugged Harry back up off the ground. "When did you get so sweet, Harry? Before this year I couldn't imagine you ever acting like this."

Harry shrugged at her as they began walking again. He noticed that they were now far behind the rest of their friends but didn't seem to mind much. He slid his wand out of its holster and waved it in front of them, creating a sound barrier around them before answering. She gave him an enquiring look. "Silencing charm," he offered by way of explanation before responding. "I don't know what it is, really. I think part of it has to do with my Occlumency training. I have better control over my emotions now. Before I would have been much too embarrassed to say half the things I say now. But I think a lot of it is just the new outlook I've taken with my life. It feels so good to be doing something. I felt so restless and guilty last year, knowing that a war was brewing and that I wasn't really doing anything about it. The only time that feeling dissipated was when I was teaching the DA. But now I know that every day I'm working hard to become more powerful so that when the time comes I can help make a difference. I feel good about myself. I don't feel guilty about having a little fun because I know that I'm doing everything I can for right now."

Ginny nodded beside him, looking forward. "That makes sense." She then turned toward him. "I'm really glad to see you so happy, Harry. I...well we were all worried about how you were going to take the loss of Sirius." Ginny studied Harry closely as she said this. She noticed that his eyes glanced downward momentarily, and he let out an almost inaudible sigh. Other than that, he did not react to her mention

of his dead godfather. "I don't think any of us thought you could ever bounce back so quickly or thoroughly. Have you talked to Ron and Hermione at all about this or about your new outlook on life?"

Harry studied Ginny for a minute before responding. "No, not really. For one thing, neither has asked me about it. Hermione seems to assume that I'm just avoiding the issue entirely and keeps trying to convince me to talk about my grief and to stop denying my feelings and pretending that nothing's wrong. Ron has ignored the situation entirely, and he spends half the time angry at me about one thing or another anyway."

"Yeah, well, Ron is a prat. I can vouch for that," Ginny admitted ruefully. "And I know what you mean about Hermione as well. We actually had a talk about that recently." Harry looked at her sharply, almost accusingly. "Oh don't give me that look. I defended you and tried to convince her to back off, but she won't listen to reason."

Harry had the grace to look contrite. "Sorry, I didn't mean to jump to conclusions. I just don't like people talking about me...."

"It's alright, Harry," she interrupted. "Given your circumstances it's entirely understandable. You have people constantly talking about you behind your back and pointing at you and everything. It's only natural that you'd get a little defensive about it."

"Well thank you for sticking up for me," Harry told her sincerely, "but I really don't think anything will convince Hermione. Once she has her mind set on something, it's almost impossible to deter her. Just look at the house elves; she continues on with spew for the sake of the house elves, completely ignoring their pleas for her to stop. It's not that I disagree with her. She always means well, but she goes about things the wrong way."

"I know what you mean," Ginny agreed. "Have you considered telling the two of them?" She didn't need to specify what she was talking about.

“Of course,” Harry replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Believe it or not, I hate having to keep secrets from you guys. But it’s too dangerous to tell anybody. Hermione is too likely to turn me in to Dumbledore or another adult, and Ron’s temper is much too unstable for him to be trusted with this type of information. He’s liable to just shout everything out in a fit of anger. I’m skating on thin ice right now. If Dumbledore or anyone else were to find out about half of what I can do, it would make my life much more difficult. I wouldn’t be able to train freely. I’d be watched like a hawk. The only reason I’m not being watched right now is because they assume I’m incapable of getting into too much trouble at Hogwarts and that I’m incapable of leaving the grounds.

“Back at Privet Drive, they have Order members watching the house all day and night. Any time I leave the house, they follow. They don’t bother paying too close attention to me inside the house because they assume that I can’t apparate. But if they found out that I was capable of all these things, I’d be tailed nonstop. I wouldn’t have a moment of privacy, and my training would be impeded. Dumbledore is intent on keeping me in the dark right now. I think he only gave me the Assistant Professorship to appease me, to keep me busy, so that I wouldn’t get too restless and do something stupid this year.”

“So why do you trust me then?” she asked. She couldn’t get around the fact that he didn’t seem to have any problem with her knowing all that she did, when he refused to tell anybody else, even his closest friends, the smallest of details.

“Well, you know what you do because you figured me out,” Harry replied truthfully.

“Right,” Ginny nodded. “But you don’t seem too bothered that I know.”

“That’s because I’m not bothered,” Harry returned automatically.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I trust you,” he replied simply.

“But why?” she demanded.

Harry shrugged at her helplessly. “I don’t know. I just know that I don’t have to worry with you. I know that you would never willingly tell anybody anything that I’ve asked you to keep secret. I know that you’re not going to blurt it out in a fit of anger. I’m actually kind of glad you found out. It’s nice having someone to talk to, even though you don’t know everything yet.”

“Yet?” Ginny asked coyly, a large grin spreading across her face.

Harry gave her a small smile in return and shrugged his shoulders again. “I’m not ready to tell you everything yet. But I trust you. I have little doubt that you’ll be hearing more of my secrets as time goes by. And we’ve already created some secrets of our own that we share, like your special training.”

“Thank you for trusting me,” she told him earnestly.

“You have nothing to thank me for. You’ve earned it,” Harry told her sincerely. “Thanks for being so understanding.”

“Any time, Harry. Any time.”

Harry spent the majority of that night working on essays, both his own and ones Professor Caldwell had given him to grade. The next night was another full moon, meaning another long night with his werewolf friend. Harry claimed a headache and went to bed early that night, setting up the illusion charm yet again. He once again only managed a couple hours of total sleep that night, but he had thankfully been thinking ahead. He brewed pepper-up potion to get him through the day.

Chapter 9: Happy Anniversary: A Halloween Party

As the week passed by, a growing feeling of dread began to fester in Harry's stomach, and he thought he might know why. He voiced his concerns to the Headmaster during their weekly Occlumency lesson. "I think Voldemort is up to something. I think it's going to be starting...tomorrow."

Dumbledore sighed heavily, the twinkle noticeably absent from his eyes. "I had wondered....It would make sense that he publicly announce his return on the 15th anniversary of his supposed downfall. Have you had a vision?"

"No," Harry replied, shaking his head wearily. "Not a vision or anything. And I can't say my scar has been bothering me much more than usual either. It's just a gut feeling, like I know something bad is coming."

Dumbledore nodded, his fingers steepled in front of his face. "The Order will be on full alert tomorrow, but I'm afraid that as of right now we have no leads as to what he may be planning," he revealed.

"It's going to get ugly pretty quickly, isn't it?" Harry asked trepidly, knowing the answer even as he voiced the question.

"I'm afraid so," Dumbledore admitted. "In the height of the last war, there were attacks almost daily. Once this war starts in earnest, I'm afraid it will most likely escalate back to that level rather quickly. The Ministry, while they have admitted his return, have taken his silence as a sign that he is nowhere near his former power. They are not prepared for a full scale war."

Harry nodded. "I was afraid of that. Fudge really is a bumbling idiot. We need someone more competent in his position before things get too far out of hand."

"Cornelius is not an ideal choice for Minister," he agreed, "but removing him from office could potentially be disastrous. There are many who could do a much better job, but we could not guarantee

that one of those candidates would get the position. Indeed, someone much worse could fill the vacancy. It's not as simple as just getting rid of Fudge. But anyway, enough about that," he suddenly shifted gears. "Let's get on with your lesson, shall we?"

The feeling got worse the next day, and Harry would be damned if he was going to sit around and do nothing. Harry told Ginny about the feeling he had and his conversation with Dumbledore the night before. When Harry told her that he didn't plan to just sit and wait at the castle, she immediately began to worry.

"But Harry, what do you plan to do?" she asked him, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace in his office. "You don't know where he's going to attack. And even if you did, you can't go alone."

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I just wish there was some way I could find out what the Order was up to. Dumbledore said they'd be on full alert, so they must have people keeping eyes out in places they expect Voldemort might attack."

"If you could somehow sneak into Headquarters you probably could. Any news is bound to go through there," Ginny mused.

Harry's eyes lit up. "Ginny, you're brilliant!" he exclaimed.

"How's that?" she asked in a mixture of confusion and amusement.

"Grimmauld Place," Harry explained as if it were obvious. "All I have to do is wait around there and listen for any news."

Ginny stared at him as if he was stupid. "How do you plan on doing that? First of all you'd have to get inside, and you can't apparate directly into it. Secondly, don't you think someone would notice you hanging around?"

Harry gave her a smirk that clearly told her that he knew something she didn't. "I think it's time I let you in on another of my secrets." She cocked an eyebrow up so high that it almost disappeared past her hairline. Never much a man of words, Harry let his transformation

speak for itself. Where he once stood, a black owl appeared. He flapped his wings to bring himself up to her eye level and green eyes met brown.

“Harry?” she asked disbelievingly. “But...what...how?” She shook herself. “I thought you were a panther.” It was said almost accusingly.

Harry changed back to human form. “I am a panther,” he said, and a moment later a black panther with the same green eyes was staring back at her.

Ginny swayed on her feet. Harry was back in human form and guiding her into a chair in an instant. “Easy there, Gin. You don’t look so hot.”

“How is this possible?” she asked more to herself than Harry. “How do you have two forms? It’s not supposed to be possible. Everyone knows that.”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied honestly. “I was as stumped as you are. When I took the potion, I had two different visions, one of a panther, the other an owl. And I was able to transform into both.”

“I always wondered...” she trailed off. “You were there on my birthday. I should have known. Your eyes were the same. They never change. From human to panther to owl, they’re always the same. And you’re the one that was out flying with Hedwig.”

“Yep,” Harry laughed. “You have no idea how much I laughed when you first suggested that I keep an eye on Hedwig and her new friend. Then when Hermione was going on about their flying being some sort of mating ritual....” Harry couldn’t go on as laughter overtook him.

Ginny joined in. “Oh...my...god...” she choked out in gasps.

“I know,” he replied once his own laughter began to die down.

When she finally managed to get herself under control she asked, “So what’s your plan then?”

Harry thought quickly. "Have you written to your mum about your new dress robes yet?"

She shook her head. "No, I've been meaning to, but I haven't gotten around to it yet."

"Good," he replied. "She's the most likely to actually be at Grimmauld Place. You write her a letter, and I'll deliver it tonight. Then I'll stick around and wait to find out if and where the Death Eaters attack. Then I can leave and apparate to the spot."

Ginny's face took on a worried expression. "But Harry, why not just let the Order handle it?"

"I can't just sit back and do nothing, Ginny," Harry protested passionately. "This is my war too. And I intend to be a part of it."

"I'm just worried about you," Ginny admitted, standing up. "No one else knows you'll even be out there. What if something happens to you? What am I supposed to do while you're gone? What if you don't come back? What'll I do then?"

Harry could clearly see that Ginny was beginning to panic. She had begun pacing back and forth again. He strode toward her and grasped both shoulders, forcing her to face him. "Ginny, it's alright. I'll be fine, trust me. I've been training hard since the start of summer. I can help. I need to help. I promise I'll come back. I'll let you know as soon as I do get back so that you don't have to worry about me all night."

Ginny threw her arms around Harry, and he instinctively pulled her into himself. "How can you be so calm?"

Harry shrugged in their embrace. "Maybe it would make you feel better if you saw me in action," Harry half asked. "We can go to the Room of Requirement, and I can show you a little demonstration of the kind of training I've been doing." Ginny just nodded against his shoulder.

They held each other for another long moment before separating. Harry noticed that Ginny's eyes were sparkling with unshed tears. He hoped that he could allay some of her fears. Ginny took a moment to compose herself, then the two of them headed for the seventh floor. There was only about fifteen minutes left until the start of lunch, so it would have to be a short demonstration, not that Harry minded. He didn't want to over exert himself. He was looking to have a long night ahead of him.

When they reached the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy, Harry paced back and forth three times thinking of his usual training room and dummies. He opened the door and ushered Ginny inside. He cast his usual locking and privacy spells on the door before leading her over to the dummies. He briefly explained to her what the dummies were and what he was going to do with them, then sent her over to a corner that was marked off. The training dummies would not pass into that area.

Harry set two of the dummies up at auror level and taught them several standard spells. The first five minutes he spent mostly dodging and blocking spells. After that, he launched into the offensive, and both dummies were down within two minutes. Ginny was staring dumbfounded at him as he walked over to her.

"Where did you learn to do that?" she asked him.

"I told you I've been practicing," he pointed out.

"Well yeah," she admitted, "but I figured you were just practicing new spells or something along the lines of what we do in HA. That was incredible." There was awe in her voice which oddly made Harry feel distinctly proud.

"Thank you," he said genuinely. "Now do you feel a little better about what I need to do tonight?"

She nodded absently then added verbally, "But I still don't like it. And I better hear from you the moment you get back, or I'll bat bogey you back to Merlin's time."

"Deal," Harry immediately agreed.

They sat next to each other at lunch and both unconsciously sought the other after their classes that afternoon. They spent most of their time in companionable silence, just drawing comfort from the other's presence. Ginny wrote her note to her mum just before dinner. The usual Halloween feast was served to them at dinner time, but Harry and Ginny were both subdued. Considering that Harry lost his parents on Halloween, his behavior was not seen as anything abnormal. After dinner, Ginny made the announcement that she was headed for the owlery. Harry claimed that he had a lot of work to attend to in his office.

Once Harry made it to his office, he shortened his hair, turned it brown, and put a glamour over his scar. He put in his color contacts, changing his eyes to brown as well. He also changed out of his Hogwarts robes, wearing a simple muggle outfit: dark blue jeans and a black form-fitting t-shirt. He threw his invisibility cloak over himself and made his way to the owlery. When he arrived, Ginny was alone. He took off his cloak, and she was startled with what she saw.

"It's me," he explained simply.

She nodded absently. "How did you...never mind," she said shaking her head. "I'll ask later. Just change into an owl, so we can get you out of here."

Harry complied. He alighted on her outstretched arm and allowed her to tie the letter to his leg. She gave his feathers a few strokes and whispered "Be careful." He hooted in reply and gently nibbled on one of her fingers in an attempt to mimic one of Hedwig's affectionate nips. She giggled at the action, greatly lightening the mood. They locked eyes for a moment just before he took off. He soared through the window directly in front of her and flew out into the open sky. His owl senses were telling him exactly which way he needed to go to find his

target. Ginny didn't move until she could no longer see the black speck that was Harry. With a sigh, she headed down to the Gryffindor common room, where she would spend a long, restless evening waiting for Harry's return.

Harry, meanwhile, was enjoying his flight. Flying always cheered him up, but he knew it would be foolish to try to fly the entire way. Not only would it tire him out, but it might end up taking him too long. During his flight he had an idea. He was weary about showing off his wandless magic in public, even if he was doing it in disguise. It would just raise too many questions if anyone were to see him at it. He needed a way to hide his ability. But he couldn't use his wand because it could be tracked back to him. After about an hour of easy going flight, Harry landed in a clump of trees, reverted to human form, and grabbed a stick off the ground. He transfigured the stick slightly to resemble a wand, then replaced it for his real wand in his holster. He took out his trunk and stored his real wand inside. He then apparated to Grimmauld Place, London. He moved to a nearby alleyway and changed back to an owl hoping nobody noticed his presence.

Harry was sincerely glad when his senses told him that his quarry was nearby. He had apparently judged the situation correctly. Mrs. Weasley was currently at Headquarters. He was wary of delivering his message right away, however. He needed to be around when the Death Eaters began attacking, assuming that they did in fact launch their attack today. But he didn't think that it would be happening quite this early. The sun had only just set. But he wasn't about to wander away just in case something did happen. So he settled for perching in a tree within sight of the house, hoping that he would be able to tell if activity within the building suddenly picked up.

Harry waited for quite some time before he decided that it was probably safe to deliver his message. It had to be past 9:00 at this point. He could give her the letter, then find an out of the way place to perch to observe the goings on in the house. Harry swooped out of the tree and down through the open window leading him into the kitchen, where he expected Mrs. Weasley to be, and where an owl would be expected to deliver a letter.

Mrs. Weasley was momentarily startled when the black bird flew through the window. She clutched her chest with her left hand, while her right had immediately gone for her wand. When she realized it was only an owl, she scowled at her reaction. Granted, she did have plenty reason to be a little wound up that evening. If their estimations were correct, there would be some sort of large scale Death Eater attack happening within the next couple of hours, and she had several family members that would most likely be in the thick of it. Luckily none of the other occupants of the room seemed entirely concerned with her reaction. They were all a bit jumpy.

In the room were several members of the Order that Harry recognized. Tonks and Remus were sitting next to each other at the table. Every so often they would speak to one another in hushed tones. Emmeline Vance was also sitting at the table across from Hestia Jones. The two were mostly quiet, but would catch each other's eyes every once in awhile. Dedalus Diggle and Elphias Doge were the only other two occupants of the room.

Mrs. Weasley shook her head and approached the owl that had landed on the back of one of the chairs at the table, holding its leg out to her with a note attached. She reached out to untie the letter, then turned her body away as she peered down at the envelope. Harry took her moment of distraction to fly up into a corner of the room on top of a cabinet, which left him shrouded in shadow. He hoped that nobody else was paying attention to his presence. His black feathers ought to blend right in; it was only his eyes that he was worried might give him away. So Harry closed his eyes as he waited somewhat impatiently for some news.

Mrs. Weasley, meanwhile, was turning the envelope over in her hands unsure if she wanted to read it right away or save it for later. On the one hand, it would be nice to read what her daughter had to say. It wasn't all that often that she received owls from any of her children, much to her chagrin, but she cherished each letter that was sent. She had no doubt she would love to hear what Ginny had to say. On the other hand, she was incredibly distracted at the moment with everything going on that night, and she wasn't sure now was really the time to be reading the letter. Perhaps it would be better to save it for later.

She was still absorbed in her thoughts, absently fumbling with the envelope, when the fire turned green, and a disembodied head appeared in the fire. "Diagon Alley!" it shouted. Harry's eyes shot open at the sudden sound, as everybody else shot out of their chairs. "It looks like a full assault. We need all the backup we can get." The voice sounded somewhat frantic.

"Right, you heard the man," Lupin took over. "Everyone grab hold of the tea kettle." Everyone did as he ordered, except Molly Weasley, who was, as he guessed, remaining behind. Remus took a moment to look into all their faces before he said, "Activate." There were several items left out of place on the table, Harry noticed, as he surveyed the room. They must have had several different portkeys set up for all the obvious places where an attack might take place. In a flash, Mrs. Weasley found herself alone in the room.

Harry was just about to launch himself out the window when the fire erupted in green sparks again and a different voice shouted. Only this time the voice shouted a different location entirely. "Hogsmeade! Over a dozen Death Eater's just apparated in from what we can see. We need back up as soon as possible."

Molly once again found herself clutching her chest. "No," she said simple, resignedly. "They all left. Diagon Alley...a full assault."

"Shit!" the voice announced, then disappeared entirely. Harry didn't stick around to hear any more. He was already zooming out of the window. He flew a bit away from the house into another alley, reverted back to human form, and apparated to the outskirts of Hogsmeade, as he had done so often the previous summer.

When he arrived, Harry was ever so grateful for his ability to muffle the popping sound most people make when apparating. Standing about twenty feet in front of him was a line of six Death Eaters beginning to stalk their way into the town. None of them heard Harry arrive behind them. Harry could already see the lights of wandfire going off in the distance.

He slipped his fake wand out of his holster and prepared to assault the unsuspecting Death Eaters, who were still marching forward into the town. Harry crept a bit closer, careful not to make too much noise. He held his left hand out, palm extended, and pointed his fake wand forward with his right. He fired off two stunners simultaneously, taking down two of the six Death Eaters. Before the red lights even reached their targets, he had sent another two sets of the red light.

As soon as the first two Death Eaters fell, the other four reacted instantly. One was too slow to dodge the red beam of light before it struck him in the chest as he turned around. The other three all spun around a little more quickly, and the other Death Eater he had aimed at was just able to get a shield up in time to deflect the light.

Harry swore under his breath. Now that they were facing him, he would be constrained to only using his wand arm to cast spells, lest he give away his abilities. The two black clad figures who were not busy shielding themselves each shot a spell towards Harry. He rolled to the side to avoid the wandfire, firing off three stunners in rapid succession as he did so. He sent all three at the same target. The first shot was a little wide to the left, the next two were dead on, however. Either the Death Eater didn't see the third spell, or he was unable to hold his shield in place for it. After he managed to block the second stunner, the third one caught his shoulder, and another Death Eater was down.

Harry, meanwhile, was scrambling to avoid the bursts of light being shot at him from his other two opponents. He sprung out of his roll fluidly and was able to dodge the first spell to reach him, a deep blue light. He threw up a shield to block the yellow light that was due to hit him. Harry was glad that the shield was able to block it because he had no idea what spell it was. He spun out of the way of another spell, a red one, and fired back a flurry of his own spells at his enemies.

As Harry ducked out of the way of another spell, several spells quickly closed the distance to their single intended target. All of them were right on the mark. The Death Eater threw up a shield and stood confidently as the spells began to deflect back. The first two spells were both red and were deflected harmlessly away from the man. The third spell, however, was a dark purple color. When it struck the

shield, it did so with a force that jarred the man slightly, making his wand arm slip. The fourth spell cleaved through the dissipating shield and struck the Death Eater, sending him flying into the wall of the building behind him and rendering him unconscious.

With only one opponent remaining, Harry had little trouble avoiding the spells flying in his direction. He quickly closed some of the distance between himself and his enemy as he began flinging out stunners with reckless abandon. The man didn't stand a chance. When he too fell to one of Harry's stunners, Harry summoned all their wands to him. He snapped each one individually.

His next course of action was to summon any portkeys they may have been wearing. Harry was careful not to touch them as six portkeys zoomed towards him. Instead, he vanished the lot of them. He then bound each Death Eater and moved them into an alley. He set up a quick and simple illusion charm followed by a confundus charm to keep anyone from noticing the bodies there.

With that accomplished, Harry set off into a brisk jog into town. He could still see some wandfire in the distance, so he knew that this battle was not over yet. The streets were shrouded in darkness, hardly any light to guide his way. No lights were on in any of the houses that he passed. The town looked eerily deserted. Harry changed into his panther form to cover the distance more quickly.

Within a couple of minutes, Harry could see what all the commotion was about. Barricaded against the front wall of the Three Broomsticks were Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, and Minerva McGonagall. They were holding off Death Eaters attacking them from all sides but were having little luck doing anything more than just surviving. They could hardly get any spells off without taking a hit, and when they did, they hardly ever hit their mark. The Death Eaters had them cornered.

And while that was going on, Harry could see random Death Eaters in the streets knocking in walls and starting fires. It appears that Mrs. Weasley wasn't able to summon much help for Hogsmeade. Harry began with the Death Eaters causing damage, separated from the

main group. He was hoping that he could eliminate each threat without drawing any attention to his presence.

He began with the Death Eater furthest away. He was easy to dispatch, not really paying much attention to his surroundings as he tried to cause as much destruction as possible. Harry snapped his wand, vanished his portkey, and tied him up, leaving him in another alley. He didn't bother with any illusions this time.

He came upon a pair of Death Eaters next and knew that he would have to strike them both at the same time if he wanted to remain incognito. Even just a second delay could give the second man enough time to call for assistance. One man was casting *reducto* into a building, while the other was casting flame spells to light it on fire. Harry could see that this seemed to be a trend as he looked further down the street to see walls banged in and a blaze that was starting to spread.

Harry crept as close as he felt comfortable doing and sent out twin stunners to take out the pair. He repeated his same process of snapping wands, vanishing portkeys, and tying up his victims. He left them in the alley between the last two houses they were attempting to destroy. Harry took down two more Death Eaters before he made his way back to the group.

There had to be at least fifteen Death Eaters surrounding the three Order members. Harry studied the battle for a minute, trying to come up with some plan of attack. He didn't know how the Order would react to his presence. He was unknown to them. He assumed that they would continue to concentrate on the Death Eaters once they noticed that he was on their side. He continued to watch and noticed that only Kingsley and McGonagall seemed to be firing back now. Was Moody down?

He wished they hadn't spread out so much. This was going to be a difficult battle. He crept around to the back of the Three Broomsticks and decided to attack from the alley way and work his way around. He didn't want to start by attacking the middle of the Death Eaters' formation, only to have to defend from both sides from the onset. If he

could keep all the Death Eaters in front of him, he might just be able to do this.

Harry wasn't holding any punches this time around. He couldn't risk allowing anybody to reenter the fight with a simple enervate. So he didn't cast a simple stupefy to stun his opponents this time around. He had been practicing a more powerful stunner for a few weeks now. It was time to see how everbero worked in real live action.

As he raised his fake wand from the alleyway, he pointed it at his second target. His left hand was held out toward his first one. Harry pushed out with his magic and two deep red lights shot out into the battlefield. When the first man was hit, he was lifted bodily off the ground and thrown several feet through the air. As luck would have it, he was thrown directly into another Death Eater. The second target sailed into the wall of the building across the street and slumped to the ground. All attention turned toward Harry as he stepped out from the shadows.

"Is this a private party? Or can anyone join in?" Harry asked loudly. That was when all hell broke loose.

In the distraction that his presence caused, the two remaining Order members were able to stun two of the Death Eaters. Harry, in the meantime, was doing away with all pretenses and holding up a shield with his left hand as he fired spells with his fake wand. A few of the Death Eaters remembered themselves and went back to firing at the Order members, while about ten black robed figures focused on Harry.

Harry began firing everbero at anything that moved. Most were able to construct a strong enough shield in time to block the spell. He did notice that one Death Eater was not so lucky. He too was thrown clear across the field of battle. Harry was a constant flurry of motion. He never stopped, lest he end up in harms way. There were not just stunners and minor hexes headed his way, and he was not confident that his shield would be able to block everything.

Harry paid special attention to the colors of the spells flying in his direction. Anything resembling the green of the killing curse or the

brownish-orange of crucio, he avoided at all costs, even if that meant walking into another colored spell. He would just have to hope that his shield would be enough. Harry continued to fire at his attackers, but he was gaining little ground. With so many of them, he was hard pressed to knock any of them out of the fight.

When one stopped attacking to throw up a shield, there were still nine or ten others bombarding Harry with spells. He knew that he would have to find some way to begin evening out the numbers. The only question was: how? The problem was that all of the Death Eaters were able to conjure a shield in time to block his attacks. He couldn't continue to give them the time to do so because he would quickly become exhausted in a fight like this.

Some people might have called his next move suicidal, but to Harry, it was the only way he saw to win this battle. Rather than keep his distance from the Death Eaters, Harry charged them. He continued to hold up his shield against the onslaught of spells, while avoiding any particularly dangerously colored spells, but he was beginning to grow weary. He knew that he would not be able to hold up his shield much longer, which made it all the more important to end this fight quickly.

With his closer proximity, Harry began scoring hits against his opponents. He managed to catch one with his powerful stunner and another with a cutting curse across his wand arm. An unexpected advantage of his new tactic, was that the Death Eaters now had to be careful with their own spells, lest they hit their comrades. The green lights stopped entirely, and the orange lights were now few and far between. Harry managed to stun two more Death Eaters with everbero before he knew he had to drop his shield.

Kingsley and Minerva were only being covered by a handful of Death Eaters now, so they weren't as limited in their actions as they had been. The Death Eaters did keep a continuous stream of spells coming their way, but they were able to peek out and send several spells of their own. Kingsley managed to stun one of their attackers thanks to McGonagall's skillful Transfiguration work. She transfigured a rock into a cat which she sent out to distract her opponents, leaving Kingsley open to stun the Death Eater as the cat clawed at his legs. They didn't have any idea who it was that had come to their rescue,

nor did they have much time or energy to spare to see how he was doing. They could only hope that he could hold them off long enough for them to dispatch their own enemies.

Harry was down to six opponents when he finally had to drop his shields, and one of them was injured on his wand arm. Harry was exhausted already, but he could not allow himself to slow down. He couldn't stop moving, especially now that his shield was no longer there to protect him. He rolled out of the way of a purple light, and shot an everbero at one of the Death Eaters as he jumped back up to his feet, bringing their number down to five.

He dove out of the way of a yellowish curse, casting a stunner on his way down. Four remaining. He rolled over to avoid another flash of light, but he was a little too slow. The curse connected with his left shoulder and sliced down almost to his elbow. Harry let out a scream of pain, but he shot back up to his feet and ignored it as best he could. He shot out another everbero toward the Death Eater who just struck him. The man tried to erect a shield to block it, but Harry was angry. And his spell reflected that anger. The red spell cleaved the shield in two and struck the Death Eater in the chest. It was with slightly less force, but enough to knock him out. Only three left.

Harry rolled out of the way of an orange spell. Unfortunately the action caused him to roll temporarily onto his injured arm. He had to bite back the groan of pain as he continued moving, avoiding a yellowish spell. The action pushed him right into another spell, however. Another gash appeared just below his knee on the back of his leg, stretching down his calf. Another howl of pain and rage escaped his lips as he let out a bludgeoning curse toward the offender. His shield didn't make it up in time to block or otherwise lessen the blow. The man was rocketed out of sight. Only two left to dispatch.

McGonagall and Kingsley tried the same tactic to distract their next target, but he was prepared for them. He shot a reductor at the cat as soon as it drew close enough to him and was able to recover in time to block Kingsley's stunner. Not one to be dissuaded, Minerva McGonagall transfigured three cats and sent them all out. This proved to be too much for the man, and he too fell to Kingsley's

stunner. They repeated this tactic again to take out another Death Eater.

With only two Death Eaters left covering their position, they risked going on the offensive. Kingsley was able to quickly down his opponent, while McGonagall dueled her own enemy. Once Kingsley finished off his own Death Eater, Minerva's didn't last long against two opponents. The two Order members turned toward their mysterious savior to see him take a cutting curse to the back of his leg and the resulting bludgeoning curse that sent his attacker flying through the sky.

The two quickly rushed to his aid, managing to down one of the remaining attackers. The last Death Eater seemed to realize that he was the only one left, for he stopped his attack. Instead, he reached inside his cloak and screamed out "Activate." The field that was littered with Death Eaters was now empty but for the two Order members standing ten feet off from the stranger.

"Shit!" Harry eloquently screamed in frustration. He dropped to his knees and punched the ground. Then he seemed to remember his injuries for he clutched his left arm with his right hand, while his left hand went to his right leg.

"Easy there," Minerva soothed, stepping towards him. "Looks like you got cut up there a bit. Let us take a look at that for you."

Harry's head snapped up and he seemed to notice their close proximity for the first time. "There are about ten Death Eaters hidden in alleyways throughout the town. I vanished their portkeys, so they should still be there. I need to go," he told them as he rose shakily to his feet.

McGonagall stepped closer to him and held out her hand in a calming gesture. "Wait. You're in no condition to go running off on your own. Let us take a look at your injuries first. We owe you at least that much for saving us back there. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, shaking his head. “But I need to go. I’m glad you’re alright.” He disappeared with a crack.

He reappeared back at his regular apparation point on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He held his right hand over his left shoulder and began healing his arm. The only thing he had ever healed before were small cuts, scrapes, and bruises. He had never attempted to heal a wound like this before. He just hoped that he was able to do so.

A soft blue glow emitted at the top of the gash. It slowly began to spread down the rest of his arm as Harry guided the healing spell. As it traveled down, Harry noticed that it was closing the wound. It wasn't perfect, leaving a scar in its tracks, but it was enough to get by for now. After a minute he had completely closed the wound on his arm, and he shifted his attention to his leg. After another minute or so, that wound had also closed.

Both wounds were scarred, and it was noticeable that he had been in an attack, but he would worry about that later. For now, he needed to get back to Hogwarts before anybody noticed his absence. He transformed into an owl and took to the sky. His night vision was vastly improved in owl form, and he could clearly see Hogwarts castle in the distance. He noticed that his left wing was a little tender, and his right leg ached a bit. His wounds in human form must transfer over to his owl form, he mused.

It only took him a few minutes to reach the castle. He landed in the owlery. After a brief greeting with Hedwig, he landed and changed back into his human form. He dug his invisibility cloak out of his trunk and slipped it on. He made his way to his office to change out of his bloody clothes before making his way to the Gryffindor common room.

He didn't run into anybody on his trek, for which he was grateful. When he reached his office, he pulled his trunk back out and stepped inside. He went into the bathroom and stripped out of his clothes. He jumped into the shower to wash himself off. If anybody besides Ginny was still awake, it wouldn't do for them to see him all sweaty and dirty. Besides, he didn't exactly want to sleep in all that filth. Despite how relaxing it felt for his sore and tired body, he tried to keep his shower quick because he didn't want to keep Ginny waiting. He knew she'd

still be awake in the common room waiting to make sure he made it back alright.

Several minutes after entering the shower, Harry was reluctantly toweling himself off. He threw on his school uniform and reverted his appearance back to normal before exiting the trunk. He shrunk it down and returned it to his pocket before exiting his office for the Gryffindor common room. His leg and arm were still aching, forcing him to concentrate on his movements. He made sure that he didn't walk with a noticeable limp just in case anybody saw him. And he didn't want to worry Ginny when she saw him.

He made it to the Fat Lady's portrait without interruptions and quickly crawled inside. It was late, but not so late that it would be unheard of to see somebody awake, so Harry was not sure what to expect when he entered. He was hoping it would be deserted, but he wasn't counting on it. He could just imagine Hermione sitting there waiting for him to return so that she could set in on him. But as luck would have it, only one person inhabited the room, and she was sitting in front of the fire, staring at the portrait hole.

When Harry climbed through, she shot up out of her chair and ran toward him. She threw her arms around him, and Harry couldn't hold back the wince that escaped him as she squeezed against his injured left arm. He hoped that she didn't notice, but he was disappointed.

She pulled back sharply. "Are you okay?" she whispered frantically, eyeing him searchingly, eyes darting from his eyes to his arm. "Are you hurt? Do you need to go to the Hospital Wing? What happened?"

Harry held up a finger to her lips to quiet her. It did the trick. As soon as his finger touched her lips she stopped in her tracks and froze noticeably. "Shhh. I'm okay. Let's sit down, and I'll tell you what happened. But let's make it quick because I'm exhausted."

She gingerly took his right arm and led him to a couch in front of the fireplace. A small fire was still going in the grate, but it wouldn't be long until it was reduced to only glowing embers. It was still enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from it. Once they were settled she spoke, "What happened?"

Harry sighed and jumped into the story. He told her about his trip to Grimmauld Place, how he hid in a corner after her mother had taken his note. He told her about the first fire call and how everybody left for Diagon Alley, then how a second fire call came in asking for reinforcements in Hogsmeade. He told her that he headed to Hogsmeade because nobody but her mum had been left at Headquarters at that point.

He gave her a brief synopsis of his time in the town. He downed several Death Eaters who were off doing their own thing, causing random acts of destruction. Then he told her how he confronted the group of Death Eaters surrounding the three Order members. She gasped when he told her that a group of ten plus Death Eaters attacked him, and she grasped his hand tightly. He told her that he managed to down them one by one but that he took cutting curses to his left arm and the back of his right leg. He let her know that he was able to close both wounds but that they were still a little tender, which is why he winced in pain when she greeted him so enthusiastically.

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” she immediately apologized. “If I had known you were hurt...”

“Shh Ginny,” Harry silenced her, shaking his head. “You couldn’t have known. It’s alright. I’m just not quite as gifted a healer as Madame Pomfrey, so it will probably be a day or two before I’m completely back to normal.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to go to the Hospital Wing?” she questioned. “What if they leave scars?”

“Then I’ll have two more scars to add to my collection,” Harry attempted to joke. She did not look amused. “Look, Ginny. I can’t go to the Hospital Wing. What would I tell her? Besides, McGonagall and Shacklebolt saw the injuries that I had. It wouldn’t take them long to put two and two together and realize it was me out there. I can’t afford to let that happen.”

She sighed, but relented. "Fine. But if they still bother you in a couple days, you're going to let Madame Pomfrey look at them even if I have to stun you and drag you to the Hospital Wing myself."

"Deal," he readily agreed.

She was still tense but had relaxed slightly at his agreement. "So what happened next?" she inquired.

"McGonagall and Kingsley must have been able to stun the Death Eaters that were still trying to hole them down, because they came and downed one of the two Death Eaters still attacking me," Harry explained. "The last one must have realized that he was the only one left, because he activated a portkey, which took all of the Death Eaters away."

"Oh no," Ginny cried, though she didn't let her voice carry lest she wake up half their house.

"I know," Harry sympathized, "but at least I was able to vanish the portkeys of the Death Eaters I had stunned earlier. They should at least be in Ministry custody now, so it's not a total loss."

"That's true," she consented. She ran a tired hand through her long mane or red hair and let out a sigh. "I still can't believe you fought off over 20 Death Eaters tonight. What the hell were you thinking when you started attacking that big group? You could easily have been killed." Her words were scolding, but he could see in her eyes that she wasn't so much mad at him as she was worried.

"I couldn't let them just keep attacking McGonagall and Kingsley. By that time Moody was already down. It was only a matter of time before the other two fell as well. I couldn't just let them do that," Harry practically pleaded with her to understand him. "I did everything I could to take out as many as possible without letting the others find out. But that whole group was concentrating on the two of them. There was nothing I could do except just to attack them."

Her eyes were beginning to become glassy, and he was starting to fear that she would cry. He didn't have the best track record when it came to dealing with crying girls. "I just don't want to lose you," she said, sniffing. "We just started to really become friends, but I can't imagine what it would be like without you here. I just wish you would be more careful." She swiped a hand across her eyes to brush her tears away which had been pooling up in the corner of her eyes, threatening to fall. She then very carefully but determinedly scooted toward him on the couch and wrapped her arms around him, careful not to come into contact with his left arm.

He returned the gesture, wrapping his arms around her and whispered into her ear. "Shh. It's alright. I'm alright. I'm not going anywhere. We've still got a date to go on. I wouldn't want to break that commitment, would I?" He continued to whisper to her as she clutched him tightly. He awkwardly rubbed a hand up and down her back in an attempt to comfort her. As he held her there, with her head tucked under his chin, a flowery smell invading his senses from her hair, his exhaustion finally caught up to him, and he began to doze off.

Ginny Weasley was having a wonderful dream. It wasn't terribly exciting or anything; she wasn't even really doing anything at all. She was just laying back and spending time with...with...well with someone she cared for very deeply. She was being held in his arms, as they laid together outdoors on a grassy knoll, staring up at the sky. It was a very peaceful day. It was warm out, but not uncomfortably so. There was a slight breeze as well, which kept the two of them quite comfortable wrapped in their embrace.

They weren't talking to each other at all. Talking didn't really seem necessary at the time. It was enough just that they were together, in each other's arms, relaxing and enjoying the beautiful day. He shifted slightly, and she responded by burrowing closer to him, enjoying the warmth of his body and the feeling of his arms wrapped around her.

She was only able to enjoy it for a moment though because she quickly began to realize that something wasn't quite right. He seemed worried or troubled about something. His body had tensed up suddenly, and he couldn't seem to keep his arms still. No, nothing was right about this at all.

As she began putting things together, the beautiful setting before her faded away. The body that had been holding her remained the same, but they were no longer outdoors, and he was still incredibly tense. She blearily opened up her eyes and found herself staring into blackness. It wasn't a deep blackness like there was no light and she was staring into shadows. No this was a black of a different nature, and she quickly realized why. It was black cloth. Her hand was on it, and she moved it around experimentally, quickly realizing what it was she was lying on.

She was cuddled up on the couch with a boy, but not just any boy. She had fallen asleep in the arms of Harry Potter. That brought a bemused smile to her face for a moment, but then she realized why they had fallen asleep together. That prat had gone and almost gotten himself killed. Sometimes she wondered how he could be so incredibly reckless with his own life, while at the same time so concerned for everybody else. He was a mystery all right.

He mumbled something then. She didn't catch what he said, if he had said anything coherent at all, but it was enough to distract her from her musings. Something was wrong with Harry. He was incredibly stiff and was shaking slightly. A gasp escaped from his mouth, and she turned her head to see him shaking his own head back and forth as if hoping to ward off some unknown force. His face was scrunched up, and he looked to be in a terrible amount of pain. He was biting his lip, and she received quite a shock when she noticed a trickle of blood making its way down his chin.

"Harry," she whispered trying to wake the boy. It had no effect. "Harry," she said a little louder, shaking him a little. He still didn't respond, but the pained expression on his face grew worse. One of his hands flew to his scar as the blood running down his chin began to accumulate. He was still biting down on his lip. "Harry," she called much more urgently, shaking him hard. When he still didn't respond, she scrambled out from her awkward position.

Once she left, he curled himself into a ball and whimpered pathetically. It tore at her heart to see him like this. He was normally so strong and in control, and she knew for a fact that he would never

let his guard down so fully in front of anyone. Yet here he was, helpless and weak. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't wake him, but he seemed to be suffering. He was grasping at his scar, so there was a pretty good chance that it had something to do with Voldemort. She thought about running to get someone, but she didn't want to leave him alone, nor was she sure that he would want her to draw any undue attention to him.

She struggled with herself over what to do for a moment before finally making up her mind. She sat back on the couch next to him and reached over to run her hand across his cheek in a soft caress. She decided that if nothing else she would try to comfort Harry as best she could. From what little she knew about Harry's episodes with his scar, there was little that could be done except wait it out. She wasn't content to just sit back and watch him suffer, so she decided that if she could afford him some small comfort in the midst of his torment, then she would do anything she could.

He flinched a little when she first made contact with his skin, and she wondered if this had been such a bright idea after all. But after a moment he seemed to relax just a little and accept the presence of her hand. She ran her hand across his face a little, then settled for playing with his hair. She gently massaged his scalp and curled his hair around her fingers. Then she would run her fingers through his shoulder length locks.

She wondered to herself why he had grown his hair out this summer. Was it just to help with his disguise? Did he like it like this? Did he dislike his old hair style? She had always liked his hair in the past. Sure it was messy and unruly, but it was incredibly cute. And she thought that it suited him well. She liked the new hair on him as well, but she missed the old haircut a bit.

While she idly stroked his hair, Harry began to relax little by little. He slowly uncurled out of his protective ball, and Ginny began to coax him further. She whispered soothing words to him and guided his head into her lap. She continued with her ministrations, her left hand now playing with his hair as her right hand held his left, lying on his chest. Every so often she would squeeze it gently in an attempt to

offer him comfort. She was happy to find that every so often he would squeeze back lightly.

She watched his face now as he continued to battle through whatever nightmares he was being subjected to. His right hand still held onto his scar, but she noticed that it had loosened up a bit. He had stopped biting his lip, she noted thankfully. Every so often he still let out a gasp of pain, but it seemed more subdued now. He would also mumble incoherently from time to time.

They continued in that manner for several minutes before she noticed any new differences in him. He finally let his arm fall away from his forehead, and his body relaxed noticeably. There was still some stiffness left in it, but it was more subtle now. It seemed the worst of it had passed. She continued to hold his hand and play with his hair for several more minutes to make sure he didn't have a relapse of some sort.

Eventually satisfied that the worst had passed, she once again attempted to awaken the dark haired boy. Extricating her hand from his, she gripped his shoulder gently and shook him slightly. She was pleased to see that he at least responded this time, though he didn't fully wake up. He swatted at her lazily with one arm and mumbled something under his breath. She shook him again, "Wake up Harry."

His eyes finally opened up, and he stared straight up. Green eyes met brown, and the pair froze for a long moment as Harry processed several things. Eventually he managed to croak out, "Ginny? What's going on?"

"Shh, it's alright," she calmly reassured him. His voice sounded a bit rough, but not overtly so. "You were having a vision or a nightmare or something, but it's over now. You're okay." She kept her voice soft because she didn't want to alarm him. She wanted to keep him relaxed.

"Voldemort was mad," he told her, frowning and scrunching his eyebrows together. He licked his lips nervously and started when he tasted the coppery substance on his lips. His left hand flew up to his

lip, and he examined it as he pulled it away, noting the blood he had wiped away.

“You bit your lip,” Ginny offered by way of explanation. She began gently running her fingers through his hair again. “I didn’t know what to do,” she commented. “We both dozed off, and I woke up when you started tensing up and moving around. When I heard you gasp, I looked up at your face to find that you were in pain. You bit your lip and clutched your scar. I tried to wake you, but you weren’t responding, so I eventually just gave up. I thought about running for help but decided against it. From what I know about your scar pains, you just have to wait them out. And I know that you don’t like to draw unnecessary attention to yourself. So I just settled for trying to comfort you as best I could until it passed.” She knew she was rambling slightly by that point, but she didn’t know what else to do.

“Sorry,” he said as he sat up and edged away from her slightly. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. He was angry that his attacks didn’t go exactly as planned. It sounded like there was more than just the two attacks I heard about. But he was pretty angry about Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Harry,” she said, giving him a small smile. “I just wish there was more that I could have done for you. I felt so helpless. And seeing you like that just kind of made me scared.”

“Sorry,” Harry said again. He looked pensive for a moment before continuing. “I reckon it’s not an entirely bad thing that I woke you up. I can’t imagine people’s reactions if they came down to find us asleep on the couch together.”

She giggled slightly and quickly agreed. “You’re probably right. I can just imagine Ron coming down and challenging you to a duel to defend my honor or something equally stupid.”

Harry gave a forced laugh, but it was easy to tell that he wasn’t really all that amused. “We should probably head on up to bed. We’ll be tired enough as it is without staying up half the night chatting.”

“Yeah,” she agreed somewhat reluctantly. Something seemed a bit off with him. He was abnormally subdued. It was understandable considering the night he had, with fighting off Death Eaters and receiving visions of a Dark Lord, but she couldn’t help the feeling that it went beyond that.

She stepped forward and hugged him, “Goodnight Harry.”

He was stiff in her arms, but he awkwardly wrapped his arms around her and patted her back gently as he said “Goodnight Ginny.”

He pulled away, and she watched as he walked uneasily to the boys’ staircase and began his ascent. Her gaze never faltered until a few moments after he had risen out of her sight. She sighed as she sank back into the couch they had only recently awoken from. It had been an incredibly long night. First she had been almost frantic with worry waiting for him to return. She had been short with her friends that night, and she knew she should probably apologize the following day.

It was actually her short tempered presence that had convinced Ron and Hermione to head up to bed early without ever confirming where Harry was. They had been worried when he didn’t show up at curfew. Neville had reminded them that the curfew didn’t apply to Harry any more, which set Hermione off another one of her tangents about abusing privileges. She had been going on for a solid few minutes when Ginny finally snapped at her. She told the bushy haired witch to mind her own business, that she didn’t always know what was best for every one else, and that she wasn’t always right.

Ginny knew she was overly harsh with her words, but nothing she had said was a lie. Hermione did have a problem with that. She always forced herself into other people’s business, even when they protested. And she tended to have this air of superiority about her...she just assumed that she always knew best and that others should just heed her advice and get on with it. It could be incredibly frustrating at times. She was just so bloody stubborn and pigheaded.

Granted most of the time she was right, at least in matters that were more non-personal. It was when she was sticking her nose into the

personal lives of other people that she really became irritating. Like that conversation the two had shared about Harry. Hermione had reprimanded her for “coddling” Harry and allowing him to continue with his charade, allowing him to pretend that there was no war going on and that his godfather wasn’t really gone.

And then she went on to lecture her about taking advantage of Harry in his vulnerable state. This wasn’t the proper time to pursue a relationship, she had been warned. She was insulted at the insinuation. She had never hid her crush on Harry when she was younger, and she paid for that constantly through all the teasing she was subjected to by her brothers and classmates. But most of that had died off once she began dating other guys. The only two friends who had never really thrown that in her face were Hermione and Harry himself.

To have Hermione bring it up like that and to go so far as to accuse her of trying to snag Harry while he was in a “vulnerable state” was downright ridiculous. First of all, they were just friends. She could see where her friend could get the wrong impression, but to just throw out an accusation like that without verifying any of her facts was inexcusable. And second, Hermione just refused to believe that Harry might actually be okay. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Hermione was convinced that Harry was actually quite miserable inside, and that he was just ignoring his pain as some sort of defense mechanism. And she was determined to draw him out, despite his insistence that it was completely unnecessary.

So when you take her already tentative feelings toward Hermione added with the stress of knowing that Harry could at that moment be fighting for his life, it really wasn’t unexpected for Ginny to express her feelings to Hermione. And rather vehemently at that. Of course Hermione wasn’t one to take criticism lying down. She accused Ginny of encouraging his behavior, adding to the problem.

As the two began to argue back and forth, Ron and Neville had silently made their exit, unnoticed by the two girls. Eventually, Hermione had stalked off in a huff telling Ginny that since she obviously didn’t care what happened to Harry or how late he stayed out that she could just wait up for him by herself. It was actually quite

lucky how that had turned out. She would have been hard pressed to suppress her reaction when Harry finally made it back.

Beyond that, Hermione would have been in a towering rage by that time. It was quite late when he finally crawled through the portrait hole. She probably would've insisted on leading a search through the castle for him, which could have been very bad. The last thing they needed was to call attention to Harry's absence. And knowing Hermione, she probably would've picked up on something either in Harry's behavior or her own at some point and become suspicious. Or she may have stumbled across one of his injuries. No, it was definitely for the better that Ginny was the only one waiting up for Harry.

As she thought back on their reunion, she couldn't believe her reaction. She had completely broken down on him. But more than her own reaction, she was shocked at how well Harry had handled the situation. He had gathered her in his arms and whispered comforting words until she had finally settled down and eventually dozed off. She had never known him to be incredibly sensitive. He always seemed awkward in situations that involved much sentiment. And she remembered hearing about his experiences with a crying Cho the previous year. He had definitely not handled that as well as he had handled Ginny that night.

But he had seemed entirely different when she tried to return the favor, she now realized. When he had woken up in her lap and she began playing with his hair again, he seemed to grow rather uncomfortable. He drew away from her and beat a rather hasty retreat. It was all so confusing. Why was he so reluctant to accept comfort from her? Or was he just a little out of sorts because of the night he had? Or because of the vision? He had mentioned that Voldemort was angry. Maybe he had been torturing people again or perhaps he had even gone as far as to murder someone. That would be enough to shake anyone up.

She sighed. There was no use staying up all night thinking about it. Maybe a good night sleep was all he needed to return to normal. She knew she could sure use one. She would just wait and see how things played out the next day and reserve judgment until then. So

with that decided, Ginny rose from the couch and climbed the stairs to the 5th year girls' dormitory where she climbed into bed and eventually dropped off to sleep.

It was a battered and weary crowd that was called together. Many of the faces scattered around the table were stained with dirt and dried blood. On some you could clearly see where the tracks of tears had taken their course. It had already been a long night, but it was not over yet. Not for them.

At the head of the table, a man stood. He was a man normally filled with a youthful energy that belied his aging appearance. Tonight that energy was not present. Tonight he looked every bit his age, all 150+ years. The twinkle that was ever present in his eyes was gone, his genial smile forgotten. It had been a long time since anyone had seen him in a condition like this, about 15 years if you want to be picky.

He surveyed the assembled witches and wizards before him, taking in the exhausted and battle weary appearances. They were at war now, full scale. Voldemort was done sneaking around in the background. There would be no more peace, not for a long time. Voldemort was back and as bad as ever. The war, which had really been going on for over a year already, had officially begun. That night was the first of what would be many attacks by the Death Eaters as their reign of terror rang anew.

But for now, they must focus on the events that had transpired that night. It was Voldemort's coming out party, so to speak. And it marked the 15th anniversary of when young Harry Potter, barely a year old, had ended the Dark Lord's first reign of terror. He knew that it would be up to the same boy, now 16 years old, to stop Voldemort yet again. But he was too young. He was no match for Voldemort, who had an extra 50 years of experience over Harry.

No, until Harry was old enough, this was their war. They could not win yet, but that didn't mean they couldn't fight. The others knew nothing of this, of course. It would be terrible for morale to know that they had no chance of ending the war any time soon. There were plenty of battles still to be fought before young Harry would be ready, and they needed to hold the Death Eaters at bay in the meantime.

But he was getting ahead of himself. This meeting was about the battles that had just taken place that night. There were multiple attacks that night, too many. It had taken nearly all of their forces just to repel the attack on Diagon Alley. And despite their efforts, the Death Eaters managed to cause massive destruction to the center of wizarding life in Great Britain.

There was also an attack in Hogsmeade. He still wasn't entirely clear how they had managed to fend off the Death Eaters there. Minerva and Kingsley were visibly distressed when they arrived back at Headquarters. They had been left, practically stranded, in Hogsmeade with Alastor as well. Alastor would not be there to attend the meeting. He was hit with a rather nasty curse in that battle. The healers at St. Mungo's were still working on him the last time he checked.

He was not the only one absent for the meeting, however. Emmeline Vance would never again attend one of these meetings. She had been struck down in Diagon Alley with the killing curse. He could only take comfort in the fact that she did not suffer in death. Bill Weasley was also grievously injured in the battle, but he would pull through. Absent along with him, his mother, Molly Weasley, refused to leave his bedside in St. Mungo's.

At length Dumbledore finally spoke to the assembled group. "As we had expected, Voldemort has chosen this night to mark the beginning of the Second War. The majority of his forces were concentrated in Diagon Alley, where most of our own number fought to hold the enemy at bay and to save the center of British Wizarding life. There was much damage and destruction, and we did suffer some casualties, but I daresay that things did not go exactly as Voldemort had expected."

He paused momentarily and took a deep breath. "We were able to push back the Death Eaters and Dementors in Diagon Alley with minimal losses on our side; however, it took almost all of our members to accomplish even this, which left us unprepared to handle any of the other attacks that occurred this night. There were several small attacks on wizards and muggles alike throughout Great Britain,

but the other main target was Hogsmeade. I understand that Minerva, Alastor, and Kingsley were left to protect the town. Alastor is currently being treated at St. Mungo's, but from what I understand the three of you were able to hold the Death Eaters at bay with very little damage to the small town. Minerva, would you care to give us the details of your battle and how you three managed to hold off a force of nearly 30 Death Eaters?"

The normally collected and rigid professor rose to her feet. Had any of her students seen her just now, they would have been shocked at her appearance. Her hair, which was normally kept in a tight bun on top of her head was laying haphazardly past her shoulders. Her stern expression was gone, replaced with one of contemplation, as though she was trying to solve some riddle. She gave Albus a nod and glanced across the table to Kingsley, the only other Order member present who knew what she was about to report.

"To put it simply, Albus, we didn't. Hold off the force of Death Eaters in Hogsmeade, that is. The three of us were quickly pinned down, surrounded. We barricaded ourselves up next to a building while more than a dozen Death Eaters kept us under a line of fire preventing us from gaining any ground. While we were occupied, the rest of the Death Eaters left to wreak havoc on the town." She paused and shook her head before taking a deep breath and continuing. "We were helpless. They had erected anti-apparation wards, preventing us from even escaping our position. If they had wanted, they could have easily taken over the three of us, but they were content to play with us for the time being, which is what inevitably led to their downfall."

"Alastor fell to a curse, so we activated his emergency portkey, leaving just Kingsley and I to hold off the Death Eaters. But not a couple minutes later, help arrived. Neither of us saw what happened, but somebody attacked the Death Eaters surrounding us. Most of them turned to face the new opponent, leaving only a handful left guarding us. We were able to systematically take each of them down one by one." Throughout her speech she had directed her gaze all along the table. Her voice was almost monotonic, but not quite.

As she continued, she turned her gaze directly to the esteemed Headmaster, and the emotion in her voice rose. "After we felled the last of the ones guarding us, we turned to our savior to find him in a duel of his own. There were numerous Death Eaters strewn about the ground around him. By the time we got to him, there were only a couple Death Eaters left standing. We managed to take out all but one. The last one activated a portkey which transported all of them away.

"It was a boy, Albus. He couldn't have been much older than 17. He dueled a dozen Death Eaters at once. The boy had a few serious injuries. He was hit with a cutting curse on his left arm and his right leg, and that's just what I was able to see from the minute that he was standing before me. He seemed nervous when I talked to him and quickly told me that he had managed to take out about ten other Death Eaters throughout the town and that he'd vanished their portkeys. Then he left, apparated right out." She slumped down in her chair, finished with her monologue.

"Did you search the town?" the Headmaster queried when she didn't continue.

McGonagall shook her head to clear it up as she looked back towards the Headmaster. "Of course. We found eleven Death Eaters total. One group of six, two pairs, and a single. All were stunned and bound, their wands snapped on the ground nearby."

The Headmaster sighed from his seat at the head of the table, thinking over what he had just been told. A boy had come out on top of a duel with a dozen Death Eaters, and that was after he had already managed to take out an additional eleven. "Do you have anything to add, Kingsley?" he questioned the bald-headed man sitting a few seats down from him.

Kingsley looked up shaking his head. "No. Like she said, we weren't that involved in what really took place there. We mostly just did cleanup. There were several fires that we stopped while we were searching the town. Other than that, it's exactly as Minerva said."

The old man steepled his fingers in front of his chin, his elbows left on the table as he pondered over the situation. "Did either of you recognize the boy?" he finally asked them at length.

McGonagall shook her head no as she responded. "No, I've never seen him before in my life. But he didn't sound foreign. I'd guess that he grew up somewhere in England based on his speech. But other than that, I have no idea. I think it's possible that he was using some sort of glamour charms because I think he recognized me. But I know I've never taught the boy, unless that's not what he really looks like."

Kingsley added his own two knuts. "Never seen the kid before in my life."

The Headmaster nodded absently. "I think I should like to review your memory of the night in my pensieve later," he said, addressing McGonagall. "Perhaps we can glean some new information about this mysterious young man."

"Of course," she replied immediately.

"Now, moving along to other matters..."

Harry awoke the next morning feeling slightly sore. He was a little late for his usual morning run and was considering just skipping the exercise altogether this morning to give himself a bit of a break after his busy night. But a nagging voice in his head would not allow him to become complacent and forced him up and out into the sunshine. It was a brisk morning, with dew sweeping across the surface of the lake. The leaves on the trees lining the lake were a mixture of greens, yellows, oranges, and reds, painting a beautiful medley of color contrasting the bright blue of the sky.

Harry absentmindedly activated his warming charm around his person to protect himself from the cold as he stepped out the doors. He was pleased to find that neither his leg nor his arm were bothering him much that morning. The flesh around his newly healed wounds was still a bit tender, but nothing that he couldn't deal with. There was still a visible scar left over from each injury, but it was already

beginning to lessen as well. Harry was hopeful that he wouldn't be left with any additional permanent scars to add to his collection. In the meantime, he had added some glamour charms to both offending marks to hide them from view.

Harry continued through his regular routine. After finishing his jog, he headed inside to the Room of Requirement. He went through his workout routine, then showered and dressed. As he came out of the shower room back into the main workout room, he found a certain red-haired woman waiting for him.

“Good morning, Harry,” she greeted evenly.

Harry could immediately tell that she had something on her mind. He smiled reassuringly at her and returned her greeting. “Morning, Gin. To what do I owe this pleasant surprise visit?”

She gave him a small smile as she responded. “I was wondering if we could talk after breakfast.”

He wasn't entirely surprised at the request. The previous night's events were obviously weighing on her mind. The least he could do was meet with her to allay her worries. “Sure thing. Meet you in my office afterwards?” She nodded her agreement, so Harry strode toward her and held out his arm. “Shall we head down to breakfast then?”

She rewarded him with a wide smile as she slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. They traversed the corridors and stairways down to the ground level together mostly in silence. She seemed to have a lot on her mind, so Harry decided to let her be with her musings and to just provide silent company. The Great Hall was very sparsely populated. Being a Saturday, the majority of the student population chose to have a bit of a lie in.

The two Gryffindors sat next to each other at their house table and quickly ate through their meals. Ginny in particular seemed to be eating in a bit of a rush, rivaling Ron's usual pace, though she didn't eat nearly as much as Ron would. She finished eating before Harry, but didn't pressure him at all to hurry. She just sat quietly at his side

as he continued to indulge himself in the culinary skills of the Hogwarts house elves.

A few minutes later, Harry was contentedly full. Part of him wanted to hang around in the Great Hall until the owl post came. He was anxious to read about the attacks that took place the previous evening. He knew that there were at least two attacks, one in Diagon Alley and another in Hogsmeade, but he didn't know anything about the attack in Diagon Alley since he spent all his time in Hogsmeade. What's more, he didn't know if those were the only two attacks. One glance at Ginny, however, convinced him otherwise. She was anxious to leave, and he knew she wanted to talk to him pretty badly if she had gotten up extra early to catch him in the Room of Requirement.

So Harry forced down his curiosity and turned to his companion. "You ready to go?"

She nodded eagerly and jumped out of her seat. Harry couldn't help but chuckle at her restlessness, which earned him a slug on his upper arm and a halfhearted glare. He followed her as she set a brisk pace back through the halls of Hogwarts and up to the fifth floor where his office resided. She opened her mouth to mutter the password as they reached his door, but it proved to be unnecessary. With a flick of Harry's wrist, it opened up as they approached.

The two entered the office, and Ginny immediately plopped down into one of the arm chairs in front of the fire place. Harry lowered himself onto the small sofa and relaxed into a reclined position as he turned to Ginny. She looked to be deep in thought as though she were trying to decide where to start. Harry let her continue with her thoughts as he warded the room for privacy with a few waves of his hand.

After a couple minutes of silence which he spent studying his friend, Ginny finally turned towards him. She seemed momentarily taken aback to find him watching her but shook it off and began to speak. "I'm guessing you want to know why I asked to speak with you."

Harry shrugged. "I assumed it had to with last night."

She nodded. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. Well I think the first thing I should tell you is what happened before you arrived. Hermione is likely to be mad at you, but you won't be alone in that respect. We got into a bit of an argument last night after she was ranting about you abusing your privileges as an Assistant Professor by ignoring the regular curfew. I finally got so fed up with her that I yelled at her to mind her own business, which led us into a big argument before she finally stalked off and up to bed. It actually worked out better that way because it wouldn't have done to have her waiting for you when you got back."

Harry agreed wholeheartedly. "I was actually worried about that when I was making my way back to Gryffindor Tower. I was relieved to find that you were the only one waiting up for me." He let out a sigh and looked deep into the chocolate brown eyes across from him. "I'm sorry about Hermione."

She waved away his apology. "Don't worry about it. It's not your fault."

"But it is my fault," Harry insisted. "You were arguing about me. The only reason you two are fighting is because of me. I didn't mean to put any strain on your relationship with her, or with anyone else for that matter. Maybe telling you my secrets wasn't such a good idea. It's just an added burden that you don't need." Harry was completely oblivious to the reaction of the girl sitting before him as he continued to rant away.

Ginny couldn't believe he would say something like that. Did he really wish that he hadn't told her anything? "Harry, shut up!" she finally yelled at him, stopping him in his tracks. "Did you really mean that?" When he just looked at her confusedly she clarified her query. "Do you really wish that you hadn't told me anything?"

Harry didn't miss the hurt tone in her voice and quickly realized that she had taken his statement in entirely the wrong way. "Of course not," he backtracked. "I'm not saying that I regret telling you anything. It's been great having someone to talk to, even just a little bit. I just thought it might be unfair to you, having to keep secrets from your

friends, putting unnecessary strain on your relationships. It's unfair to you."

"Why don't you let me decide what's fair to me?" she asked him with a steely voice. "I wasn't just blowing smoke at you when I told you that I wanted to be there for you Harry. Even if I didn't know everything that I do know, which I imagine is still only scratching the surface, I'd still be at odds with Hermione over you. She is being completely unreasonable right now. Ron might be afraid to stand up to her, but I am not. She has no right trying to force anything out of you or trying to make you look bad just because you don't have to follow the same rules the rest of us do. She just gets so bloody self righteous sometimes."

"Don't I know it," Harry interjected. "Did she ever get you to try to join spew?"

"Yes," Ginny said. "She even tried to get me to help her with knitting all those stupid hats she was leaving out last year."

Harry chuckled lightly. "Did you know that most of the house elves refused to even enter Gryffindor Tower after she started leaving all those lying around?" When she shook her head no, he continued. "Dobby was forced to clean the entire tower all on his own because all of the other elves were so insulted. He kept every single hat he picked up, and he's not averse to wearing several of them at once."

"He cleans the entire tower on his own?" Ginny asked him.

"He did," Harry told her. "I'm not sure if he still does or if the other elves will help out now. I don't think Hermione has been laying any clothes out this term."

"That's terrible," Ginny said. "He shouldn't have to do all that work on his own just because Hermione's on a bloody crusade."

"I know," Harry agreed. "I felt the same way, but Dobby is thrilled to do it; otherwise I would've stepped in right away."

“Even if he doesn’t mind the extra work, it’s still not right,” Ginny insisted.

Harry nodded in response. “I probably would have confronted Hermione about it, but there was just so much other stuff going on last year that it didn’t seem to be a good time to do it. The last thing I needed last year was to be in a big fight with Hermione.”

“I’ll grant you that,” Ginny said. “But if she starts up again, we are going to confront her about it.”

“Sounds fair to me,” Harry readily agreed.

“Good,” Ginny replied, then shook her head. “We’ve gotten way off topic now, haven’t we?” Not waiting for a reply, she continued. “I meant to ask you this last night, but I got distracted. How did you change your hair?”

“My hair?” he questioned. When she nodded in response, he shrugged as he said, “It’s just a simple glamour charm to change the color. I can teach it to you if you’d like.”

“No,” Ginny interrupted, “not your hair color. How did you change the length of it? You went from long to short to long again in one night. How did you manage that?”

Harry sat back in his chair to think about it. He didn’t really know how he controlled his hair length, to be honest. For most of his life he had kept it at the same length without ever really thinking about it. It was only that past summer that Harry realized that he was doing it and tried to actually change it. “I don’t know exactly,” Harry said. “When I was younger, my aunt always used to try to cut my hair, but it always ended up looking the same no matter what she did. One time she got frustrated and buzzed it all except for a small fringe in the front to cover my scar. I was so nervous about going to school the next day and getting teased for it, but when I woke up the next morning, my hair was back to normal.”

Harry took a breath before continuing. "Over the summer I thought about it and realized that I've never had to get my haircut. It always just stayed the same. I figured that I must be doing something with my magic subconsciously to keep it that way. And sure enough, when I concentrated enough on it, I found that I could change its length."

When he looked up at her after finishing his story, he found her mouth open, gaping at him. Harry was confused. What was she staring at? Why was she reacting that way? He didn't really see the big deal about his being able to control the length of his hair. Sure it helped in disguising himself slightly, but it didn't have many uses beyond that. "Er, Gin? You alright?" he finally asked her, when she made no move to respond.

She abruptly shut her mouth and adopted a sheepish grin. "Sorry. Yes, I'm fine, but Harry, do you realize what this means?" she asked with a hint of wonderment in her voice.

"Er, no..." he responded uncertainly.

"There is no spell to change hair length," Ginny explained. "There are potions that can speed up growth, but there is no actual spell to make it grow or shrink or anything. The fact that you can do that can only mean one thing." She had a very eager expression on her face, as if she couldn't wait for him to ask his question.

And he was not one to deny her. "And what would that be?"

"You're a metamorphmagus," she told him straightforwardly.

It was Harry's turn to gape. "What?" he blurted out. "How can...? How do you...? Are you sure?"

Ginny nodded slowly. "It's the only thing that makes sense. Have you ever tried changing your appearance in any other way?"

"Not beyond simple glamour charms," Harry admitted, already beginning to think over the possibilities. It would sure make disguising himself easier in the future.

“Well you should work on that sometime. It doesn’t hurt to at least give it a shot,” Ginny suggested brightly.

“Yeah,” he said distractedly. He thought over it for a moment. “I’ll have to see if I can find anything about metamorphmagi in the library. It would probably help if I knew more about the ability.”

“Probably,” she agreed. Her face turned serious once again as she timidly said, “I have another question for you.”

“What is it?” he asked carefully.

“Well yesterday I got to see you train for the first time...” she trailed off a bit.

“Yes...” he encouraged her to go on.

“Well I was just wondering where you learned to do that. I mean, you looked like you were some professional who had been training all his life, the way you were dodging spells and everything,” she said uncertainly, not sure if she was pushing him for too much information.

He mulled over what she had told him for a few minutes. “I started training in the beginning of the summer, around the time I wrote you that first letter. I’ve been doing it every day since then.”

“But there’s no way you could’ve become that good in so short a time,” she insisted.

He blushed slightly under her implied praise. “I don’t know,” he replied, searching for the answer. “I guess I’ve always been good at stuff like that. I’ve always had good reflexes, like when I’m playing Quidditch. I think growing up with the Dursleys helped with that, actually.”

“What?” she asked, a bewildered expression crossing her face. “How could growing up with those horrible people help with dueling?”

Harry chuckled lightly. "Well, it helped me improve my reflexes, specifically when it comes to dodging." She was still looking at him questioningly, so he continued after a small sigh. "My relatives were never exactly nice to me. And my cousin and his friends especially liked to torment me whenever they got the opportunity. So I had to be good at dodging and able to move quickly...you know, to avoid being hit all the time."

The last thing was added on so casually that it felt almost like a physical slap across Ginny's face. Her face flushed in indignation as she shot up from her seat and began pacing back and forth. After a minute of silent pacing, she whirled around to face him. "Your relatives hit you?" she demanded.

Harry nodded glumly, a bit taken aback at her outburst. "My aunt and uncle only occasionally hit me, but it was Dudley's favorite hobby, his and his friends'. I always had to be careful during recess at school and when walking home after school ended. They liked to gang up on me and rough me up a bit. And they'd often throw things at me. So I got used to avoiding punches and dodging balls and rocks and things like that," he explained to her calmly.

She sank back down into her seat with a defeated look on her face. She shook her head absently as she struggled to fully comprehend the situation. "How could anyone be so horrible to their own family?" she asked rhetorically. Harry just shrugged at her, still a bit uneasy with the current subject matter and Ginny's reaction to it. "Have you told anyone else about this?" she finally asked him after a couple minutes of silence.

Harry thought carefully. "Not in so many words, I don't think. Everyone knows they're horrible; I just don't like to get into the details," he explained.

Ginny leaned forward and placed a hand gently on Harry's knee. "Well for what it's worth, I'm sorry that you had to go through that, Harry."

Harry just shrugged at her again as he replied, "It's alright. Like you told me before, it won't be long until I'm out of there for good. Then I'll

never have to deal with them ever again. In fact, I don't plan on ever seeing them again."

Ginny looked up sharply at this admission. "What do you mean, Harry? Dumbledore's sure to make you go back this summer."

Harry smirked impishly at her. "Oh, I have no doubts that he expects me to go back there," he told her mysteriously.

"So..." she prodded.

"So what if I don't plan on letting that happen?" he asked her seriously.

"Well I imagine he would make you," Ginny stated.

"He'd try, I'm sure," Harry admitted. "But that's assuming that he had any idea of what I was planning."

"And what are you planning?" Ginny questioned, seriously interested in where he was going with this.

"Well, you may or may not have noticed, but I've been doing a lot of reading lately," Harry began. She nodded as though that were the most obvious thing in the world. "One of the subjects I've been focusing on is wards. I've already read several books on various different types of wards. And I am about to start one about the Fidelius charm."

Ginny's eyes widened considerably at that admission. "You're gonna hide out for the entire summer?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm thinking about it," Harry told her.

A mischievous grin formed on her lips as she said, "They're gonna go bonkers when they find out."

“Too true,” Harry agreed. “Which is why it’s important that nobody finds out until after I’m already gone,” Harry said, looking at her pointedly.

She held her hands in front of herself and said, “You know that your secrets are safe with me Harry. Just so long as you’re protecting yourself sufficiently, I won’t tell a soul.”

“I knew I could count on you,” Harry told her. “Of course, there’s still a lot of time between now and then, and a lot of details to plan. I’ll have to sneak out next term to find a suitable place and to set up all the necessary wards and everything. But I’ve already managed to sneak out of the castle successfully several times, so I’m not terribly worried.”

“You sure do make life more interesting, you know that Harry?”

He smiled at her warmly. “One of the perks of being best friends with Harry Potter.”

With a statement like that, Ginny’s smile couldn’t get any wider.

Chapter 10: Quidditch Woes

“Thank you, Minerva,” Dumbledore told his trusted colleague before him. “Do you wish to view the memory with me?”

The Transfiguration professor considered the offer for a long moment. “Yes, I think I shall. We owe this boy quite a bit, and frankly I find myself quite curious about him.”

“Indeed,” the Headmaster agreed. “Shall we enter together?” he only half asked. After a short nod, both professors touched their wands into the pensieve and were quickly sucked into McGonagall’s memory of Halloween night.

The memory began a couple minutes before the stranger had made his presence known. Professor McGonagall seemed drawn to her past self’s plight, while Dumbledore was taking in the entire scene as best he could.

“Moody gets caught with a curse here,” she input from his side, drawing the Headmaster’s attention to the three Order members barricaded against the wall of the Three Broomsticks. Sure enough, Moody was struck by not one, but two flashes of light at roughly the same time. “We didn’t know what hit him, so we activated his portkey.”

Dumbledore nodded gravely and looked down the street. “There,” he called emphatically, pointing off in the distance. “He is just taking down two Death Eaters in the distance.” It was tough to see that far with the darkness around them, but he could just make out the two flashes of light connecting with their targets. The stranger was shrouded in shadow, but he could make out some movement heading into an alleyway.

It was about a minute later that two spells erupted from the alley beside the bar. With a flick of his wrist, Dumbledore rewound the memory several seconds and walked toward the entrance to the alley. Again, two spells exited the alley almost simultaneously. He rewound again, and by now he was directly in front of the alley peering in, but

the stranger was hidden in shadow, and McGonagall's memory would not allow him to pursue further. Again twin beams of light were shot out, catching the Death Eaters unawares.

Dumbledore's mind was churning rapidly. The two spells were too close together to have been cast by the same person. Which could only mean one thing: the stranger was not alone. But only one person walked out of the alleyway, calling out and drawing attention away from the Order members, allowing them to quickly subdue a couple more Death Eaters. Both professors watched with rapt attention as the stranger dueled with ten Death Eaters.

"You'll notice that several spells have been blocked, though he hasn't yet used a shielding charm," Dumbledore commented to his colleague.

"What do you make of it, Albus?" she asked him, knowing that the wise Headmaster was already drawing conclusions.

"His first shots on the Death Eaters were too close together to have been cast by him alone. He has a friend with him, hidden, who is shielding him while he duels. He is careful to avoid anything resembling the Unforgivables, and he tries to avoid other dangerous looking hexes, but he is not shy about stepping into some spells when necessary. He knows he's being shielded from them."

McGonagall nodded beside him, though the Headmaster's gaze was locked firmly on the battle before him. The stranger was not making any headway against his foes, though he was certainly holding his own rather admirably, especially for one so young. That's when the boy did something that was both incredibly reckless and brilliant. He charged the Death Eaters and engaged them in close range combat.

Dumbledore could spot the moment when the boy could seemingly tell that the shield had given out and began to dodge all spells that he could. Did they have some way to communicate to each other? McGonagall stiffened noticeably when the boy was struck with each of the cutting curses. Dumbledore's only noticeable reaction was in his eyes. His body did not shift in the slightest.

A short time later, the two professors were back in the Headmaster's office each pondering over what they had just scene. "So you think that there were two of them?" McGonagall finally asked, breaking the silence.

"I'm sure of it," the Headmaster replied. "And both must be rather powerful by the looks of it. The boy's companion was able to hold up a shield continuously for several minutes. A difficult feat. And the boy showed himself to be excellent in a duel. He was a bit reckless, but his strategy proved to be sound. He wasn't making any progress with all the Death Eaters in front of him, so he rushed them and made them wary of their own crossfire. It was a dangerous maneuver, sure, but without it he would not have won that duel."

Silence descended over the pair as Dumbledore's mind was racing rapidly. They could make for excellent allies, whoever they were, but he was not sure where their loyalties lay. They were obviously against the Death Eaters and for that he was thankful. But he was wary of having two such powerful unknowns entering the equation. He hoped to get a chance to meet with them to find out just where they stood.

Dumbledore finally broke the silence between them. "Thank you again for sharing your memory of the battle with me."

"Don't mention it, Albus," McGonagall replied easily. "I only hope I get the chance to thank them once again." Dumbledore only nodded solemnly in agreement.

OoOoO

As Quidditch practice came to an end Harry, as was becoming custom, helped Ron get the balls all packed away before the two headed into the changing rooms. He didn't get to spend nearly as much time with Ron as he had in the past, and despite whatever problems or issues going on between them, Harry wouldn't trade his friendship with Ron away for anything.

He began making it a point to hang out after practices. It gave them a chance to hang out just the two of them and talk Quidditch or whatever else might come up, kind of like old times. When they were finally walking into the changing rooms, the rest of the team was just clearing out. They all bid their goodbyes as Ron and Harry were walking in.

“Pretty good practice,” Harry commented as he bunched up his robes and threw them over his head.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed with a broad smile. “Slytherin won’t know what hit them.”

“You’re not kidding,” Harry returned. “Katie is better than ever, maybe even better than Angelina, Ginny is right on form with where Katie was last year, and Stephanie’s not far behind. By the end of the year, they’ll be unstoppable.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ron grumbled good-naturedly. “I can hardly stop them even when I know exactly what play they’re running.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Harry told his friend. “You’ve been on form since day one. You play like you have been come game day, and we may end up with a shutout on our hands.”

“I don’t know about that,” Ron mumbled shyly.

“Just don’t let the Slytherins or anyone else get into your head,” Harry told him honestly. “That was your biggest problem last year. You’ve got it down physically. You just have to keep to keep your head in the game and you’ll be unbeatable.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Ron told him earnestly.

“Nothing to thank me for; it’s just the truth.” Harry paused to pull on his black school robe. “You going to schedule more practices now that the game is coming up?”

“Yeah, I need to talk to Hooch about that,” Ron replied, his voice muffled by the robes he was trying to pull over his head. “Should start up with the extras at the end of the week or the weekend.”

“Were you planning on sticking around to work on strategies or were you going to head back?” Harry asked.

“Nah, I’ll head back,” Ron replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Doesn’t make much sense to come up with new strategies now when the team won’t have time to learn it properly by game time. Let’s head back in. You up for a game of chess?”

“Sure mate,” Harry returned as he walked out the door, holding it open for Ron. “Sounds like a plan.”

By the next day, Harry’s battle scars were practically nonexistent. He still applied a concealing glamour to them just in case, but someone would have had to be looking really hard to even be able to spot the blemishes.

He did eventually get his hands on a copy of the Daily Prophet, which covered the attacks that had occurred on Halloween night. It focused on the attack at Diagon Alley, and only briefly mentioned that smaller attacks had occurred in a couple other towns like Hogsmeade. Harry wished he had more information to go on than that, but he didn’t have any way to find out more. He resolved to ask Professor Dumbledore about it later that week during their Occlumency practice, but he doubted that the old man would be very forthcoming with information.

The week passed by terribly slowly, mostly due to the appearance of the Daily Prophet every morning. It seemed like every night there was another attack, and the following morning breakfast only served to dish up more bad news. Harry was thankful for the fact that he’d had no more visions. Of course, all that really meant to Harry was that Voldemort probably wasn’t personally involved in the attacks. And as they weren’t really targeting anybody of importance, Voldemort didn’t react too much to the nightly attacks. He did feel occasional pangs of pain in his scar, but it was definitely bearable. His friends didn’t even notice.

Spirits were down throughout the castle, save for a selection of Slytherins. Ginny brought the subject up during one of their Animagus training sessions, surprising Harry slightly with her insight. "You can't expect to be able to save everyone, you know," Ginny commented as Harry was sneaking a furtive glance at the Daily Prophet lying open on his desk.

Harry was broken out of his internal reverie and eloquently responded with, "Huh?"

"It's just a guess," Ginny amended, "But I imagine you feel kind of helpless right now. You wish there was more you could do to stop these attacks and save people, but you can't. Even if you weren't stuck at school, you have no idea where the Death Eaters will attack next. We all feel helpless about it."

Harry, who had been leaning against his desk, rose up to his full height and began pacing back and forth. "I know that, I just wish there was something I could be doing. I hate just being stuck here with no way to help. I just feel like I should be doing something...."

"You are doing something," Ginny interrupted, shooting up from her perch on the arm of a chair. "More than anyone else I know. You're training, preparing. By the time you graduate, hell by the time summer rolls around, you'll probably be ready to go out and join the fight, stop some attacks, rescue some people. I don't think anyone in the Order is preparing as much as you. Sure they all have their jobs that they do, but are they really preparing to go to battle?"

"And you're sure as hell doing more than any other student here. I admire you for what you're doing, Harry. You already almost single-handedly stopped a big attack on Hogsmeade. That's more than anyone else can say. From what you said, practically the entire Order was in Diagon Alley on Halloween and the Death Eaters still managed to do quite a bit of damage. And that's not even taking into account any aurors that might have entered into the fray.

Harry, by this time, had stopped his pacing and was just staring at his fiery friend before him. "But you have to understand one thing. You can't save everyone, and you can't fight this war all on your own. Keep training and keeping teaching the rest of us how to fight, how to defend ourselves. If you teach us half of what you can do, it'll probably save our lives. I've never seen anybody fight like you do. You're giving the rest of the students hope. You're doing everything you can right now, so don't worry too much about what you can't control."

They were silent for a long time after that as Harry processed everything Ginny had just said. She had him pegged. He had been feeling guilty and helpless. He felt like he should be out searching for Death Eaters trying to stop the attacks instead of sitting around safe and sound in the castle walls. After all, that's what he had been training for. When the attacks started, he wanted to be able to help put a stop to them.

But what could he do? He had no information. He didn't know where the next attack would be. He couldn't just wander the lands hoping to just wander across some rampaging Death Eaters. He also couldn't be out every single night hunting them down. He needed to get at least some sleep. When he had some information to go off of, he would act, but until then, there was little he could do but continue to train and teach others to defend themselves.

He finally gave her a small smile as he sunk down onto the sofa. "You're right, of course. I wish I could do more, and I feel guilty just sitting here in the safety of the castle. But without any information about where the next attack might occur, there's nothing I can do except continue to prepare. At least I was able to help out in Hogsmeade. If I saved even just one life that night, then all the work I've done thus far will have been worth it."

"Well your training already saved my life," Ginny added impishly, "So I know I'm eternally grateful for all the work you've been putting into it." She was rewarded with a grin, then promptly instructed to get back to work. She wouldn't become an animagus if she kept distracting them from her lessons.

Thursday evening finally arrived, and Harry found himself riding the circular staircase up to the Headmaster's office again. Before he could knock at the door, he was already being called in. The man always did have a bit of a flair for the dramatic. Harry opened the door and strode into the increasingly familiar office. As was becoming customary, Harry bid his Headmaster hello as he made his way to Fawkes's perch to greet the red and gold phoenix.

After exchanging pleasantries with the Headmaster as he stroked the brilliant avian plumage for a couple minutes, they jumped into their lesson. Harry was continuing to improve in his Occlumency skills. He was now able to hold his shield up against his Headmaster's piercing attacks for a period of time. Each lesson he was able to hold out longer and longer. Today he managed to fend off the mental probe for a solid three minutes before cracking. He was again able to throw the Headmaster out of his mind immediately afterwards.

Dumbledore gave him a tired smile. "You are getting quite good at this, Harry," he said genially. "It's been a long time since I've had to exert myself so much. I imagine you'll be an Occlumency master by the end of the term."

"Really?" Harry inquired curiously.

"Oh yes," the Headmaster replied, giving him a bemused smile. "You're already quite advanced. There are probably only a handful of true Occlumency masters in Great Britain. You're at a level that few have ever reached."

Harry couldn't help the smile that tugged on his lips. He still had a lot of unresolved issues with the man, but at the same time, Harry couldn't help but respect him. And to have such lavish praise heaped upon him by the Headmaster, he couldn't help but be pleased with himself. Add to that the fact that he was going against the man while right under his nose, and Harry was very smug.

But at the same time, it also made him pause. If his Occlumency was already so advanced, why did he still get the occasional vision? And why did he still feel Voldemort's emotions when they were strong

enough? Not to mention his scar pains. Unable to answer his own questions, he posed them to the Headmaster.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Dumbledore told him honestly. The old man gave a deep sigh before continuing. “So little is actually known about your connection and your scar, that we don’t truly know the nature of it. We had assumed that your connection was similar enough to Legilimency that Occlumency would shield you from it, but apparently we were mistaken. Not that these lessons will have been a waste,” Dumbledore quickly added. “Even if Voldemort manages to enter your thoughts, the skills you learn here should be helpful in hiding certain things from him and in being able to expel him from your mind.”

“That makes some sense,” Harry reluctantly admitted. “I just wish there was some way to control it. It hasn’t been very bad so far because he hasn’t been participating in the attacks and besides Halloween night the Death Eaters haven’t really encountered much resistance. But if he ever does decide to participate...” Harry was at a bit of a loss of how to continue.

“I understand,” Dumbledore assured the boy in front of him. “I will look into any other possible avenues you can take to try to block the connection. Until then, Occlumency is our best bet.”

Harry nodded his acceptance. “I was wondering, sir,” Harry began tentatively, “if you had any additional information you could give me about the attacks on Halloween and since then. They only really talked about Diagon Alley in the papers. They mentioned Hogsmeade and other towns were attacked as well, but they didn’t give any details really. And the stories about the attacks since then have been lacking in details.”

The Headmaster sighed wearily. “I suppose asking you not to worry about the war for now wouldn’t do any good at this point?” he asked half rhetorically, with just a hint of hope in his voice. But it only took one glance at the teen in front of him to confirm his thoughts. “There were indeed several other attacks on Halloween. It was, as you had guessed, his coming out party, so to speak. The damage done to

Hogsmeade was minimal at best, with no casualties. There were some smaller raids that each had a few casualties. But the big attack, as the paper suggested, was Diagon Alley. I'm afraid that is all I can really tell you."

"I figured as much," Harry grumbled dejectedly, wishing that his pseudo-mentor would find it to place some trust in him. He made sure to maintain a good-natured countenance, however, as he didn't want Dumbledore to see how much the lack of information bothered him. "But it didn't hurt to ask. I suppose I should be leaving, as I have some essays to take care of."

"Indeed. A good night to you, Harry," Dumbledore called out to him as Harry rose.

"Goodnight Professor," Harry responded. He ducked out of the door and down the spiral staircase back into the hollowed halls of Hogwarts. He efficiently navigated the various passages on his way to the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor, leading him into the Gryffindor Common Room. The only interruption in his trek was Mrs. Norris, who crossed his path and looked at him crossly as if daring him to break a rule in front of her. But Harry just ignored the feline beast and continued on his way.

"Good evening Professor Potter," the portrait called out as Harry approached.

"Good evening milady," he replied cheerfully. "May I?" he asked with a wave of his hand.

"Oh of course," she told him as she swung forward, granting him entrance into the home of the Gryffindors.

OoOoO

Ron Weasley was not having the best term to speak of. And this was following a less than stellar summer as well. He had spent the majority of the summer at odds with his sister, the only other person around in his age range, besides the occasional visits of his twin

brothers. But as they greatly enjoyed pranking Ron, they hardly made matters any better. What was worse, Ron had been at odds with both of his two best friends, for entirely different reasons, neither one entirely clear to Ron.

Hermione had gotten furious when Ron brought up one Viktor Krum. Ron didn't see why she was so interested in him. Sure he was a famous Quidditch star, but who cares about that, really? Why did she need to look outside the country when there were plenty of perfectly good blokes at home? Even in Gryffindor Tower there were plenty of decent blokes around. Harry, for one, and Neville too, and even himself.... Besides who knew if they could really trust Krum? Didn't she understand that he was only looking out for her?

Needless to say, they eventually put that argument, though not necessarily resolved, behind them, as they had all of their numerous arguments before. The main problem with Ron's summer and the school year thus far was his best mate, Harry Potter. It's not that the two weren't getting along, though they did seem to be getting into arguments more often than usual.

It began over the summer. First he hadn't responded to Ron's letters right away, but that wasn't unexpected considering the state Harry had been in after the death of Sirius. What was unexpected was the letter he sent to Ginny, his baby sister. Harry had written to Ginny before writing to him, and Ron could not figure out why. Add to that the fact that Harry was getting on his case for being concerned about his sister and Ron was very confused and frustrated with his best friend. But they eventually put that behind them and exchanged letters more normally later in the summer. Things were most definitely not normal when the school year started back up.

After they had first met on the Hogwarts Express five years ago, the two had been inseparable. Several months later Hermione had invariably joined their little group, but she was always the odd one out. She was the only girl, for one, and she was also obsessed with her studies. She spent a lot of time behind a book while Harry and Ron spent the time goofing off and having fun together.

Things had followed that pattern for their first five years at Hogwarts with only a few periods where things deviated from the norm. Their fourth year being a prime example, though Ron didn't like to think about his part in that particular episode. Much to Ron's consternation, this year just wasn't proceeding in the normal pattern. Harry just simply wasn't around much any more. And when he was, he more often than not had his head in a book. He was turning into a miniature Hermione, not as obsessive but certainly too interested in reading and learning for Ron's tastes.

They still played the occasional game of chess or exploding snap and had some classes together, but it was nowhere near what it used to be. Thus far, the only thing Harry had always made time for that they shared together outside of classes was Quidditch. Harry almost always hung around in the changing room after practice to talk Quidditch with him. It was for this reason, among others that Ron was looking forward to the upcoming match against the Slytherins. Not only did it give them more to discuss, but it was also giving Ron an excuse to add some extra practices into the schedule.

Perhaps the extra time spent together and on Quidditch would be just what they needed to finally pick up where they had left off the year before. Ron was thinking about just that when he looked up from the book that was sitting open but unread in his lap to find his best mate and subject of his thoughts enter the common room. Ron couldn't wait to tell Harry about the extra practices, not to mention actually having the practices and the additional time with his best friend that they provided.

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Harry hopped through the entryway, the portrait swinging shut behind him. He noticed Hermione and Ron sitting across from each other in front of the fire. Ron, ignoring the book in his lap, spotted him and waved him over. "Hey mate," Harry greeted his friend.

"Harry, we've got our first match coming up, so I've scheduled some extra practices. We have one tomorrow at 5:00 and Sunday at 10:00 and Tuesday..."

“Whoa, mate,” Harry interrupted. “I’ve got my class to teach on Sunday at that time, you know that.”

“It was the only time that would work on Sunday,” Ron told him. “It’s just the younger class. You can cancel it this week or just move it or something. No problem.”

“I can’t just move the class, Ron. What would you do if your professors just randomly started moving their classes around to suit themselves? Moving it around would disrupt everybody’s schedules. You can just do the practice without me. It’s not as if you really need the seeker there, right?” Harry said reasonably.

“Well if you can’t move it then just cancel it,” Ron ordered, rising from his seat.

“I’m not canceling my class, Ron,” Harry stated calmly, looking intently into Ron’s eyes. “These classes are important; you know that.”

“And Quidditch isn’t?” the fiery redhead demanded.

“You know I love Quidditch Ron,” Harry reassured him, trying to hold his own rising temper in check.

“We don’t have much time left before our first match. Two weeks, Harry. We need to be ready. I will not start out the season with a loss to the Slytherins.” Ron shivered as though the mere thought of such a thing happening disgusted him. “And I expect you to be at that practice. You have to decide what’s more important to you: Quidditch or your class.”

“It’s an easy choice to make, mate,” Harry replied in a subdued tone of voice, dreading what he was sure was about to happen. The last thing he wanted right now was another row with Ron. They had been at odds off and on ever since the start of summer, and Harry really wished that they could move past all that and just be best friends again. This was not going to help with that at all.

“I knew you’d come around,” Ron beamed smugly. He turned around and moved to sit back down when Harry’s voice stopped him.

“You misunderstood me, Ron,” Harry told him.

“Whassat?” Ron asked distractedly, turning back towards him.

“I’m not canceling my class for practice,” Harry stoically told his longtime best friend. “These classes are the most important things I’ll do all year.”

“What about your classes?” Hermione finally chipped in unhelpfully at the same time Ron yelled “What about Quidditch?”

“This is more important to me than either,” Harry told his friends truthfully. “I won’t be at practice on Sunday,” he said looking directly into Ron’s face.

“Then you won’t be playing for my team any more,” Ron retorted hotly.

“Ronald Weasley!” Hermione erupted from beside him. Her eyes were wide and mouth was open, ready to start screaming, but Harry held up a hand to forestall her.

“If that’s the way it’s got to be,” Harry said resignedly, wondering how his supposed best friend could do something like that to him. Last year Umbridge banned him from Quidditch, but at least Harry knew where he stood with her. She hated his guts and wanted him to suffer. But Ron was supposed to be his best friend. How could his best friend just take away something he loved like that?

“Yeah, it is. Maybe I’ll let you back on when you learn a little loyalty to your team,” Ron half screamed as he stalked away and up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories. Harry sunk into the seat that Ron had vacated during their exchange and stared into the fire.

Harry's emotions were a mangled combination of pain, betrayal and anger. He wanted to either take off for the Room of Requirement to pound a punching bag, or even better to run up the stairs and pound some sense into Ron. More than once Harry rose as if to storm out of the room, only to droop back down in his seat a moment later. He just couldn't believe that Ron had actually thrown him off the team. It was a bad case of déjà vu, but the second time around hurt much more.

He was interrupted from his introspection by a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to find his bushy haired friend looking down at him with compassion. "I'm sure he didn't mean it, Harry. He was just upset and lost his temper as usual. He'll calm down and see reason eventually."

Harry shrugged up at her. "At least he can't take my broom away like Umbridge, right?" Harry asked, mentally adding to himself,

Hermione gave him a smile. "You're right. I had forgotten that Umbridge confiscated your broom last year."

Harry returned her smile, though it was somewhat forced. The fact that Hermione could forget what Umbridge had done to him the year before really bothered him. That wasn't something he would soon forget. Flying was one of the few things in life that could truly bring him a sense of peace. Anyone who had spent any time around him in the last five years would know that. He didn't understand how she could pass it off so lightly. And to top it all off the one time he would have liked to talk about something that was bothering him, something Hermione was always after him to do, she wandered off like it wasn't really all that big a deal.

He was beginning to realize just how far he was growing apart from Ron and Hermione. They used to be solid, joined at the hip, nearly inseparable, at least that's how he'd always thought of them. But he knew that that wasn't entirely true. They had encountered their problems over the years. Ron had dealt with jealousy issues in fourth year. Ron and Hermione were at each other's throats most of third year. And he had spent a lot of time angry at Hermione third year over his Firebolt.

Last year had been tense for all of them as well. Although most of that was probably his fault, he was willing to admit. He still thought of them as his best friends, but he couldn't help but feel the distance building between them. But luckily, where some bridges seemed to be lengthening, others were shortening. He was closer to Neville than he'd ever been. He made a point of talking to Luna occasionally; he still owed her for talking to him last year while everyone else was at the leaving feast. And Ginny, well she was a godsend. She was quickly becoming his best friend.

He was actually somewhat amazed at the whole thing. He had gone into the term expecting to be somewhat lonely, keeping everything from all of his friends, training in secret without anyone knowing. Then Ginny caught him red-handed and turned out to be just what he needed: someone he could talk to that he could trust not to tell anybody or do anything about what he told her without his approval. He didn't have to worry about what he told her like he often did with most everyone else. She was unassuming and trusted him completely, which made it easy to trust her in turn.

Ron and Hermione would never have just let him go on Halloween night the way she did. They would either have insisted on coming with or threatened to tell a professor what he was planning in order to keep him in the castle, most likely with Ron pushing for the former and Hermione the latter.

But Ginny wasn't like that. Sure she was reluctant to let him go, and she was worried about him. He had seen that quite clearly that night when she broke down on him on the couch. But he couldn't really blame her for that. After all, he used to worry about Sirius before he was confined to Grimmauld Place, afraid he'd be caught by either the ministry or Death Eaters. And even now he worried about what Remus might be doing for the Order. He could understand that.

But the point was that she'd trusted him, and she'd let him go. She had trusted his judgment and took him at his word when he'd promised he would come back in one piece. And even after that, she didn't really demand anything from him. She had a few questions, sure, but nothing too probing. There was plenty more she could have

asked, but she didn't. She was always careful not to push him for more than he was ready to give, and for that he was eternally grateful.

His musings were once again interrupted as a figure pulled an ottoman in front of his chair and plunked down in front of him. He was only mildly surprised to find the object of his thoughts sitting before him with a slightly worried expression on her face. "You alright, Harry? You look like you've got something on your mind."

Harry smiled at her a little sadly but appreciatively. "Yeah, I'll be fine, but I'm fairly sure I just got kicked off the Quidditch team."

"You what?" Ginny shrieked.

Several heads shot their way at hearing Ginny's loud exclamation. "Could you draw a little more attention please? I don't think Ron was loud enough earlier," He snapped.

Ginny cringed. "Sorry," she said contritely.

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take it out on you," Harry told her, looking earnestly into her eyes.

"It's alright. So what happened?" she asked anxiously.

Harry sighed into his hands as he rubbed them down his face. "Well I came in here after my lesson with Dumbledore, and Ron said that he scheduled some additional Quidditch practices. One of those is for this Sunday at 10."

"But you teach at that time," Ginny interrupted. "He knows that."

"Yes he does," Harry agreed.

"And he expected you to cancel your class for Quidditch practice?" Ginny guessed.

"Right in one," Harry said with a small smile.

“Well I’m also guessing that you weren’t inclined to go along with that,” she said impishly.

“Clever one, aren’t you?” Harry responded cheekily.

“The cleverest,” she retorted with a laugh. “So then what happened?”

“He told me to choose what was more important to me,” Harry explained. “And I told him there was no choice for me.”

“Oh wait, wait, let me guess,” Ginny butted in. “He got all smug and assumed you were choosing Quidditch, right?”

Harry smiled sincerely at her. “Well you do know your brother quite well. I’ll give you that.”

“So then he threw you off the team?” she asked him.

“Pretty much,” Harry said. “He said that nobody with that attitude would be playing on his team, or something like that. Then he stormed off and went up to our dorm room.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Ginny told him genuinely, looking straight into his eyes searchingly.

“It’s not that big a deal,” Harry shrugged noncommittally. “At least no one is taking my broom this year. I can still fly one way or another,” he added the last part in a whisper.

“That’s not what’s really bothering you, is it?” she asked him seriously. “Quidditch, I mean,” she clarified, still searching his eyes.

Harry met her gaze steadily and gave her a rough grin. “You really are good, you know that?”

“Yes, I do hear as much from time to time,” she responded haughtily as she flicked some imaginary lint off the shoulders of her robes.

Harry responded with a small laugh and a light punch on the shoulder that was really more like a tap. "Don't let it go to your head."

"Who me?" she retorted cheekily.

"Mmhmm," he replied throatily.

"So what were you thinking about when I came over?" she asked him seriously, all signs of playfulness forgotten on her features.

But Harry wasn't done playing quite yet. "You," he responded simply.

"Very funny, Potter," she returned, cuffing him on the shoulder. "What were you really thinking about?"

"You," he said seriously.

She studied him carefully for several moments before accepting the sincerity of his reply. "Why me?" she asked flabbergasted.

"Well I started off thinking about how I seem to be growing apart from Ron and Hermione this year," Harry told her a little sadly. But his voice picked up a little as he continued. "But then I began thinking about how I'm closer to other people this year, like Neville and Luna and especially you."

"Why me especially?" she asked him in a whisper.

"You should know the answer to that. You must be losing your touch," he teased lightly, which earned him another slug on his arm. "Well I feel like we've become pretty close lately, like you're very quickly becoming my best friend."

"And that's what you were so deep in thought about when I came over?" she asked him.

"Yep," he told her. "I honestly was thinking about you at the time."

“Well I can’t say I blame you for thinking about me,” she replied, regaining her snooty tone.

“Oh yeah? And why is that?” he demanded.

“Well I am quite beautiful and intelligent and could give any one of my brothers a run for their money in a duel,” she said as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

“You forgot loyal and trustworthy and kind,” Harry inserted.

“Of course, and all of those too, and many more. So it’s quite natural that you’d be thinking about me,” she stated.

“Well that’s a relief,” Harry blew out a breath and wiped his brow. “It’s nice to know that I’m normal for once.”

She giggled at his comment. “I am sorry about Ron and the whole Quidditch thing, Harry,” she told him at length. “I’ll try hexing some sense into him next time I see him.”

“Thanks,” Harry said with a laugh.

They were quiet for a short time. “It’s just so frustrating, feeling your best friends slipping away from you. I just keep wondering what went wrong. Why are things falling apart between us? Why now?”

“I don’t know if there are any real answers to those questions, Harry,” Ginny told him apologetically. “We’re all growing up, and not everyone is growing in the same direction. And in some cases only growing physically. The fact is that you’ve grown and matured a lot over the past several months, at least I think so. And while Ron and Hermione are getting older they haven’t necessarily gotten any more mature”

Harry was about to speak up when Ginny guessed what he was about to say. “I’m not trying to say it’s your fault. We’re at war, after all. It’s only natural that you especially would be forced to grow up a

lot in a short amount of time, given the fact that you're right smack dab in the middle of everything. Maybe in time they'll do some growing up and you'll be able to regain some of that closeness, but there is no way to guarantee it."

"So basically there's nothing I can really do about it except keep on and hope for the best?" Harry asked her.

"That's all any of us can do," Ginny replied earnestly.

Harry held her gaze for a long time before he finally responded, "I guess I just never really thought I'd lose Ron, but after this I'm not sure if our friendship will ever be the same again. I knew we had been growing apart but I never would have expected this."

Ginny reached out and gently squeezed his knee before she got her book bag and settled near him to work on her homework.

The rest of the night passed by uneventfully. Harry spent most of his time reading, not feeling up to anything else. He didn't see Ron at all until he headed up to bed. His friend was already in his bed with the curtains drawn. Harry sighed and climbed into his own bed. After finishing his workout routine the next morning, Harry headed down to breakfast. He sat by his friends as usual, but Ron was stubbornly refusing to acknowledge Harry's presence, and it made for a very uncomfortable atmosphere that was felt by all in the area. Hermione and Neville were doing their best to just ignore Ron and his attitude, but it was a pretty difficult feat to accomplish.

When lunch rolled around, Harry walked past his usual spot at the table waving to Hermione and Neville as he passed. He sidled up to the longer haired of his two red haired best friends and asked, "Mind if I sit with you, Gin?"

Ginny looked up at him warmly. "Not at all, Harry." She budged over a bit and patted the empty spot on the bench next to her. "Do you know all my friends?" she asked him.

“I think so,” Harry told her as he nodded to all the fifth years around him. “Hello all.”

They greeted him in turn, and the rest of the meal went by normally. Or as normally as it could without sitting by Ron and Hermione, with whom he had spent nearly every meal he had ever eaten at Hogwarts. The fact was he missed his friends. Not just Ron, but Hermione too. Granted they were still on speaking terms, but they were nowhere near as close as they had been in the past, and Harry would have given anything to be sitting with the two of them chatting about anything at all.

But he enjoyed spending time with Ginny and her friends. Some of the female lot were a little giggly, but he took comfort in the fact that they didn't seem to be nearly as bad as Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. Colin Creevey was around as well, but his fanaticism was more subdued than it had been in the past, so the boy didn't really grate on Harry's nerves all the time any more. All in all it was a pleasant experience, and he resolved to eat with Ginny and her friends every so often from now on. It was good to change things up every once in awhile and talk to different people.

He beat his friends to DADA after lunch and took his customary seat. When Ron and Hermione walked in, Ron immediately chose a seat on the opposite side of the room. Hermione was torn between her two friends, not for the first time. She looked about ready to head in Harry's direction when Harry took pity on her situation. He gave her a grim smile and a nod in Ron's direction. She looked at him questioningly as if to ask, 'Are you sure?' He nodded to her.

She gave him a warm smile and mouthed, “Thank you,” to him as she took the seat next to Ron. Neville, in the meantime, strolled up and took the seat beside Harry. “Hey Harry,” Neville greeted him.

“Good to see you Neville,” Harry responded sincerely.

“Sorry about Ron,” Neville told him.

“Thanks, Neville. I appreciate it,” Harry told him. “It’s just frustrating to see how quickly he can just throw away five years of friendship. But at least it shows me who my real friends are, right?” Harry said the last bit with a meaningful look at the boy, which did not go unnoticed.

Neville smiled at him gratefully. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I guess you do.”

The rest of the day went by similarly. Harry sat with Ginny at dinner again. Professor McGonagall descended upon the Gryffindors’ table at the end of the meal. She only paused briefly to speak to Ron and stalked off with him in tow, shooting Harry a not-entirely-kind look.

After the meal, he challenged Neville to a game of chess, which turned out to be a pretty evenly matched game. Neville just barely managed to beat him in the end, but Harry couldn’t remember ever coming so close to winning before. He was used to playing against Ron or on a rare occasion Hermione, and they were both loads better than he was.

While playing, Neville told Harry about some Herbology project he was working on with Professor Sprout. Much of it was lost on him, but he was excited for his friend. It sounded like it was a pretty big deal, and Neville was practically beaming the entire time he was talking about it. They also talked a bit about the HA and how they thought the class was going. Neville admitted that he had been really skeptical when Harry first introduced the dodging exercises to the class, but after several weeks of practice, his mind was completely changed.

He spent a little more time talking with Neville and Hermione before retiring to his office to work on some things. Truth was, he really needed to get out of the tower for awhile. He was given some more essays to grade from Professor Caldwell that he probably should be working on, but he really wanted to read up on Metamorphmagi in private. Ever since Ginny’s comments earlier in the week, he’d been dying to know more about the ability and whether or not he actually was one. He scoured the shelves of the library looking for books on the subject. And now he was satisfying his curiosity by reading up on the topic.

He found a couple good reference points to start with. He quickly learned that there were many different levels of metamorphmagi. Some, like Tonks, had full control over their appearances. Others had varying degrees of control. Some were unable to change their overall body structure, but could otherwise change anything. Still others were only able to change their coloring, whether skin or hair, or their hair length, as in Harry's case. There was even one reported case of someone who was only able to control the growth of his nails. That would be an odd ability.

There was no real way to tell what level you were, as far as Harry could tell, except to try changing different parts of your body until you find your limits. Harry started off small. He knew he could change the length of the hair on his head, so he tried concentrating on other hair. His first target was facial hair. He knew that some of his friends had to shave their faces regularly, but he never did. He had never really thought about it before, much the same way he hadn't thought about his hair before the previous summer.

But now he wondered if maybe he was unconsciously controlling that as well. So that evening found Harry sitting in his office, staring into a conjured mirror, focusing on growing a beard. When he didn't experience any results after several minutes, he played with the length of the hair on his head to get a feel of how he was controlling the process. Then he did his best to adapt that to his face.

The approach worked brilliantly, and he was soon sprouting a thick, full beard. He let it keep growing and growing until he reminded himself of Hagrid and his bushy beard. He couldn't help but laugh at himself as he stared into the mirror. He willed the hair to retreat back into his face until he had a respectable looking beard in place. He wiped the slate clean once he was satisfied and concentrated on just growing a beard on his chin, not on his cheeks. It took a couple tries to get it right, but he eventually managed to grow the hair exactly where he wanted it.

Harry had to squash the urge to keep going. It was getting late, and given how Hermione had acted in the past with regard to the curfew, he knew that if he didn't pack up soon, he'd have a formidable witch

to face when he made it back to the Common Room. So he reluctantly shuffled his way back to the tower to join his housemates.

The tenseness did not abate over the weekend, as Harry had hoped it would. Ron still adamantly ignored his presence, not that Harry was terribly inclined to talk to Ron with the way he was acting. And he probably wouldn't be for some time. But at the same time, Harry felt bad for the strain it put on the rest of their friends. Plus he just enjoyed life more when he wasn't at odds with one of his friends. But there was not much he could do about it.

Ron had to come to terms with it on his own and realize that there was more to life than Quidditch. Not only that, but Ron needed to learn that his actions have consequences. He too easily lost his temper and lashed out at his friends. And he just kept repeating the same mistakes over and over. Harry had forgiven him easily for it in the past, but he wasn't as inclined to do so now. They weren't kids any more, and Ron needed to grow up. If Ron really thought about it and realized what he'd done and came to talk to Harry about it and apologized for everything he had done, not just saying "Sorry for kicking you off the team," maybe then Harry would be able to consider forgiving him. There was no way he was just going to let Ron apologize and pretend it never happened.

One thing he did notice through the whole ordeal was a change in the way Ron acted around Hermione. They had always been close, of course. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been the best of friends for several years. But Ron and Hermione had always bickered with each other, most of the time over the most trivial of things. But they always argued, and rather vehemently sometimes. That didn't seem to be the case as much now. Ron seemed like he was going out of his way to keep the peace with Hermione.

Harry couldn't tell if it was because Ron was upset at Harry that he didn't feel the need to argue with Hermione, or if perhaps Ron was just finally coming around and realizing what it was he felt for Hermione. With the Yule Ball coming up, it would be an opportune time to act on his feelings. They hadn't really talked about the ball much after the day it was announced. Ron seemed to avoid the topic like the plague, whether it was about the fact that Harry was going

with his little sister or the speculation about which witch he was going to ask.

Not that anyone really had to ask that question. It was obvious to all the way Ron felt about Hermione, to all but Ron and Hermione that is. At least something good was coming out of all this mess, Harry mused, and he said as much to Ginny that Sunday night.

“What do you mean?” she asked him in return, glancing over at her friend and brother who were sharing a sofa revising in front of the fire.

“Don’t tell me you don’t see it?” he retorted unbelievably. “And here I thought I was supposed to be the thick one.”

“What am I supposed to be seeing?” she inquired, shifting her gaze from Harry to the duo and back again.

“Ever since Ron threw me off the team, they haven’t argued once that I’ve seen,” Harry told her. He cocked an eyebrow at her and added, “That has to be some sort of record for them. I think Ron may finally be coming around. All he needs to do is ask her to the ball to seal the deal.”

“Oh? So is that what you were doing then? Sealing the deal by asking me to the ball?” she teased.

“But of course,” he returned self-importantly. He waggled his eyebrows at her for a moment before becoming serious again. “It would be about time, really. Those two have been dancing around each other for years.”

“No kidding.”

Things continued more or less on par the following week. Harry continued practicing his metamorphmagus abilities in addition to his usual training, but so far he did not have any luck changing anything besides his hair length, though he did get a good laugh at himself when he managed to grow out the hair on his arms and legs. He wasn’t going to give up easily. He was used to controlling hair length,

so of course that would come easiest to him. He didn't know if he had any additional abilities, but he was going to make sure that he tried as hard as he could before he discounted the possibility.

Harry was glad to see that Ron still showed up to his HA classes, though he suspected Hermione might have had to coax him. Ron wasn't acting friendly by any means, but he was at least being a little more civil in that he wasn't completely ignoring Harry. Harry, for his part, was trying not to act like it bothered him. Ron's behavior only served to reinforce Harry's reasoning for hiding things from his friends. If this is how Ron was going to react over Quidditch, Harry couldn't afford to share any of his secrets with him. He couldn't be trusted with them.

Harry continued to spend lots of time with Ginny and her friends. He started helping them revise for their ever-looming OWLS. Ginny found a wellspring of knowledge for her Muggle Studies class in Harry. Not that she didn't have other muggle-born friends to ask for help but they were often busy with their own assignments.

Harry continued to stay ahead of his classes without putting too much effort into it. The fact that he was only taking five courses combined with his increasing abilities and growing affinity for reading were really making a difference in his studies.

He still had to hold back in class so as not to draw too much attention to his ever-increasing abilities. He was confident that he could do most spells in class on the first try, but he deliberately made some mistakes in the beginning. Sometimes he would still be the first one to successfully cast the spell, other times he would let a couple people beat him to it. Even with all he was holding back, his teachers couldn't praise him enough, much to Hermione's consternation.

Hermione was still spending an inordinate amount of time studying, trying to stay well ahead of Harry. The fact that she was taking several additional classes didn't seem to make a difference in her mind. She was determined to be the best in every subject. At first he was a little amused at Hermione's reaction to his improvements in class, but as time went on he began to feel a little hurt by it as well. Rather than just be happy for him, Hermione just got more and more

frustrated and focused. Harry tried not to think on it much as he didn't exactly need any more depressing thoughts at the moment.

If not for all the personal reading and training that he was doing, Harry imagined that he would be quite bored this term. In the past his classes had been much tougher due in part to his lack of effort and also his rather busy schedule. This year was completely different. His classes were easy. The HA was well under his control. His personal training was progressing nicely. And without Quidditch practice he had even more free time to study types of magic that caught his fancy.

Hermione was still somewhat torn over Ron and Harry's estrangement, but Harry just told her that there wasn't anything she could really do to improve the situation. Of course, that didn't stop her from continually trying to get the two of them to talk about it. Harry had no intention of doing so at the moment, not before Ron gave him one good apology. This only served to put further strain on his relationship with Hermione. While he felt that they were constantly growing apart, he didn't want to lose her friendship either. So Harry made a point of spending time with Hermione while Ron was off at Quidditch practice.

Hermione spent most of her time with Ron, mostly because Ron seemed to flock to her nowadays, and she felt bad about leaving Harry out. Harry knew the way she felt about Ron, so he understood why she would side with him. Nonetheless it still hurt that she continued to side with Ron.

There were almost daily reportings of attacks in the Daily Prophet, which created a tense atmosphere, but the normalcy of school and their every day lives combated that adequately. Life in Gryffindor Tower was relatively peaceful for most occupants. That did not extend to Ron, however, who bore the brunt of more than one prank and faced open hostility from many members of the house. None of them were thrilled at the way Ron was treating Harry, nor the loss of their star seeker. About the only person still talking to him on a regular basis was Hermione, and they were actually getting along for a change.

The Quidditch team was practicing furiously now that they had to train a replacement seeker. The honor ended up falling to Ginny, much to her chagrin, since she had done such an admirable job at the position the previous year. When Ron talked to her about it, she'd been tempted to tell her brother to shove it and find himself someone else to do the job. Practice on Friday was incredibly tense, Ginny told Harry. While Ron was putting the balls away, they had apparently been talking in the changing rooms and were considering telling Ron exactly where he could shove his Captain's badge.

When Harry heard about this, he met with the team minus Ron, and without Ron's knowledge. He told them that he wanted them to play and to win, even if it was without him. They were reluctant but eventually relented to his wishes. Practices were still tense and the team less than friendly to Ron, but things calmed down considerably. It was a good thing that they had decided to train reserves as well, or else they would have been training a brand new chaser on top of everything else. As it was, the team was nowhere near as strong as it could've been with Harry at seeker and Ginny at chaser, but it was still pretty solid overall.

Harry was worried though. He really didn't want to lose against Slytherin. They were sure to fight dirty as well. He never worried much about himself up there. He knew he could handle anything Malfoy and his goons dished out. And they always focused on him since he was the seeker, so he didn't really have to worry much about anyone else. But now Ginny was going to be seeker, and Malfoy was sure to throw everything he had at her.

So that was why, after the Ravensclaws bested the Hufflepuffs 240-100 on Saturday, Harry was leading Ginny back out to the Quidditch pitch. Ginny was bubbling with curiosity since Harry refused to tell her what it was about. When they finally reached the pitch and he stopped her, she immediately burst out, "So what'd you bring me out here for?"

"I have a surprise for you," he replied mysteriously. "I would have done this last year as well, but circumstances as they were, I couldn't."

“Do what?” she asked excitedly. She was having trouble standing still and ended up rocking on the balls of her heels.

“You’ll see in a second,” he told her as he dug his trunk out of his pocket. He enlarged it and reached inside to extract one of his most prized possessions. “Here,” he told her, handing it to her.

“What?” she asked breathlessly, spreading her hands out wide and shaking her head disbelievingly.

“I want you to use it,” he told her as he grabbed one of her hands and forced it around the shaft of his Firebolt. “I want to see you fly circles around Slytherin next week.”

“Harry, I couldn’t,” she insisted, trying to give the broomstick back to him.

Harry shrunk his trunk and quickly pocketed it. “You can, and you will. You’ve hardly had any practice at seeker, and I know Malfoy is going to pull out every dirty trick in the book to get to you. Nobody will be able to touch you on the Firebolt. You’re a great flier, Ginny. It’s a shame that you’ve been stuck out there on the broom you’ve got. Now go on, you need to get used to flying it.”

Ginny was still shaking her head insistently. “But I can’t. I can’t take this. Sirius gave this to you. What if something happened to it? You’d never forgive me. I’d never forgive myself.”

“Why don’t you leave it to me to decide what I would or wouldn’t forgive?” he asked her. “Sirius did give that to me. And I love it. But he wouldn’t have wanted me to treat it as some sacred artifact to be kept under lock and key. He would want that broom out in the air helping Gryffindor trounce Slytherin. You know that’s true. So if you won’t fly it for me, then fly it for Sirius.”

She finally stopped shaking her head and gazed deeply into his eyes as he spoke. When he brought up Sirius, her eyes began to sparkle with tears. As soon as he’d finished talking, she flung her arms

around his neck and hugged him tightly. "Oh Harry," she cried to him, the tears beginning to slide down her cheeks.

"Shh," he whispered into her ear as his arms slid around her back to return the gesture. "He always did like you. He told me how you two had talked over the summer and Christmas break. He said you reminded him a lot of my mum and dad back when they were at Hogwarts together. Said you had a Marauder's spirit in you." He rubbed his hand across her back in an effort to comfort her. "I think he'd be glad to see you flying that out there. I think he'd want to see you fly circles around Malfoy next week."

She choked out a sob as he told her all that Sirius had said about her. She was wondering when he ever had the time to tell Harry all of that about her and was astounded that they actually talked about her in what little time they did have together. She had always thought that Harry never really noticed her before this past summer. Of course, she was right to wonder about that, since this conversation didn't actually occur between Harry and his godfather until the summer after Sirius died. But she had no way of knowing that.

She held onto him tightly for another couple of minutes before she finally managed some semblance of control over herself. She rubbed her eyes on the arm of her robes to try to erase the evidence of her crying jag. This was the second time this term she'd broken down and cried on Harry's shoulder, and she was a bit embarrassed about it. She didn't normally cry so much. But she was also secretly impressed with him. He was two for two as far as she was concerned as far as comforting her in those times. She didn't know what Hermione was talking about when she said that Harry couldn't deal with a crying girl.

After wiping her face to the best of her ability, she pulled back and drew her arms back to her sides. He loosened his grip, but instead of letting go completely, he slid his arms up her back until he was gripping her shoulders, holding her at arms length. "You ok?" he asked her softly.

She nodded and wiped at her eyes again lest she begin crying all over again. After a moment she gained enough composure to reply

verbally. "Yeah, thank you. I just, I still miss him, you know?" Harry nodded here. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you trust me to fly your Firebolt." She just realized that she was still holding it as she gestured to the broom for emphasis. "And I can't believe Sirius said all that," she continued in wonderment.

"Well believe it," Harry said cheerfully. "He thought you were great. Even told me that he wouldn't have minded you as a goddaughter some day," he added hoping to lighten the situation.

Ginny's hand flew to her mouth as her eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets. "He didn't," she exclaimed.

Harry shot her a quirky grin. "He did."

Ginny stared at him wide eyed for another moment before her the corner of her lips twitched upward. In another moment she let out a snort of laughter, which Harry echoed. And soon the two were laughing openly, Ginny bent over in her hysterics.

After a moment she managed to say, "I can't believe he said that."

"I know," Harry agreed. "Took me a little off guard at the time. Not that the idea is entirely unpleasant or anything," he quickly added, suddenly afraid that he might insult her. "But it just came out of nowhere and I'm still young and all. Never really thought about marriage before."

"Well if we're trying to honor Sirius's wishes," she said suggestively as she sidled up to him, rubbing her shoulder on his side. She looked up at him from underneath her eyelashes sweetly for a moment before continuing. "Then I guess I'll fly your Firebolt." She chuckled heartily as she dashed away and jumped on the broom. She flew in a circle around him, laughing at his gobsmacked expression. "Shut your mouth, Harry. You didn't think I'd just give myself over to you that easily now, did you?" she teased.

Harry just shook his head as he looked up at her flying form and finally laughed along with her. She had definitely put a number over him; he'd give her that. She flew around the pitch a few times as he plopped down in the grass to watch. After about ten minutes or so of flying around, she descended right near Harry. "You just planning on sitting there watching me fly all day?" she asked him.

"Why not?" he returned. "You're a magnificent flier."

"Nah," she shook her head.

"I mean it. You look like that Firebolt was built for you," he insisted.

She blushed at his praise, though it wasn't terribly noticeable since her face was already flushed from flying. "Seriously though, aren't you bored just sitting there?" she asked him.

Harry shook his head. "I don't mind, really. Fly as long as you like."

She flew around the pitch for ten more minutes before landing next to Harry. She didn't dismount from the broom. Harry stood up and asked her, "Done already? I figured you'd be out here at least another half an hour."

She shook her head. "I'm not done yet. But I'm not going to just let you sit there with nothing to do but watch me..."

"I'm fine, really," Harry interrupted. "Besides, I don't think it's the best idea for you to be out here alone, especially since it'll be getting dark soon."

Ginny held up a hand to stop Harry. "You misunderstood me. I'm not going to just let you sit there with nothing to do when there's plenty of room on this thing for two." She patted the length of broom shaft in front of her for emphasis. "What do you say, Harry? You up for a little flying?"

Harry looked at her as if she had just sprouted an additional head for a second. "Are you serious?"

“Why not?” she asked him sweetly. “That is, unless you’d rather not share a broom with little ol’ me,” she mock pouted.

“Oh suck your lip back in, Weasley,” Harry teased. “I’ve never ridden on a broom with anyone else before. Are you sure it’s safe?”

Ginny nodded. “Bill once took me out when I was like six or seven.”

“Yeah, but we’re both grown now. Are you sure it’s safe for two adults?” Harry insisted.

“Yes, Harry. I’ve never shared a broom since then, but I know of others who have. And the broom is perfectly capable of carrying two fully grown adults. We’re both pretty small, so we should be more than safe,” she explained to him.

“Who you calling small, I’m at least 5 inches taller than you?” Harry joked. He knew that he was a little on the small side for a guy his age. But he didn’t consider himself to be that short, the way he figured it he was just a little below average and still growing. Though when he was around any of the six Weasley brothers, he was sure he came off a bit on the small side, as they were all either quite tall like Ron or more muscular like the twins. In that light he could see why she might call him small.

She leaned back away from him a bit and thoroughly looked him over, “I believe I’m calling you small,” she teased him. “Now are you gonnagoing to get on this thing or not?”

“As you command,” Harry said with a mock bow, doing his best to ignore the look she’d given him. His reaction to the way she’d looked at him was something he’d have to think about later, sorting his memories tonight was going to be an interesting experience. “How do you want to do this?”

She thought about it for a second. “Why don’t you sit in front, and I’ll just hold you around the waist?”

Harry nodded and took a step towards her before changing his mind. "Wait. You're supposed to be the one practicing flying the Firebolt. You're not going to get any practice if I'm flying it."

Ginny waved his concern away. "It's not a problem. I'll still get a feel for what it can do with you flying. If anything, I'll get a better feel, since you're used to flying it. You know what it can handle. Besides, I have a whole week of practices to get acclimated. Did you know that we have practice every single day this week?"

Harry laughed. "That sounds like Ron alright. I'd be surprised if he gets any of his homework done this week."

"You know it," she agreed. "Now hop on. I can't wait to get back in the air."

"As you wish," Harry replied. He threw one leg over the broomstick in front of Ginny and gripped the handle in both hands.

"Scoot back," she commanded him. "You're not going to be able to fly it all the way up there." Harry began to slowly move back, careful not to crowd her space. "Oh honestly," Ginny cried out in frustration as she reached for his hips and pulled him back sharply until their bodies were pressed together. "I'm not going to bite you, Harry. Well unless you ask of course. You aren't going to ask are you?"

He looked sharply over his shoulder at her, "Sorry to disappoint you but there will be no biting requests made today," he said a bit pompously before he winked. "Anyway I didn't want to crowd you or make you uncomfortable."

"No big deal. But we need to be pressed together for this to work."

Harry nodded, looking ahead. "You ready then?"

She slipped her hands around his middle and wrapped them about his waist. "Whenever you are," she told him once she was snugly secured.

“Here we go then,” Harry called over his shoulder. A moment later, he kicked off of the ground and rose into the air. He flew tentatively and slowly at first to get used to the added weight on the broom.

“Come on, Harry,” she cried out. “I know you can fly better than this. Show me what you got.”

“You asked for it,” Harry shouted over his shoulder. And with that, he took off as though he was shot out of a cannon. He began making sharp turns and was soon zigzagging across the pitch. He loosened up as he began to fly more naturally. He allowed the Firebolt to reach maximum speed and started to use the wind currents to his advantage as he had learned to do in practice.

Soon he was completely relaxed and flying as if he was the only one on the broom. He did some loops and barrel rolls, eliciting shrieks of excitement from his passenger. He flew up high into the sky, and plunged down into one of his trademark, reckless dives. Ginny screamed the entire way down. As they drew nearer to the ground, her grip around his waist tightened. She was pressed tightly against him, chest to back, with her head on his shoulder pressed against his neck.

He noticed that she was pressed very close to him, and he couldn't help but notice all the parts that were pressed up against his body. Sharing a broomstick certainly had its advantages. He couldn't help, nor did he try to fight off, the warm feeling that suffused his body as he thought about it. He had to break his thoughts off though, as the ground was quickly approaching.

He pulled up at the last possible second, as he always did, and if she hadn't been wearing shoes, she would have felt the blades of grass running through her toes. They flew around happily for the rest of the afternoon. They ended up staying there far later than Harry had originally planned for. By the time they touched down and began heading toward the castle, the grounds were completely dark and they had missed dinner.

They headed straight to the kitchens. Dobby greeted them in his customary fashion, overly excited to see the greatest wizard in the world and his Miss Wheezy. They were treated to a feast fit for kings and spent the entire time talking and laughing and eating their fill of the delicious food.

When Harry looked back on it, he couldn't remember ever enjoying himself more fully than he had that day. He got to watch a Quidditch match, which was pretty well played. It had been a close game, 90-100 Hufflepuff until Cho managed to catch the snitch, sealing the victory for Ravenclaw. After that he had taken Ginny out to lend her his Firebolt, and ended up sharing a broom ride with her. There was nothing Harry enjoyed more than flying, and he found that flying with someone else only served to boost the experience.

The private feast afterwards was just the icing on the cake. He didn't really realize how open he became when he was around Ginny, how all his cares and troubles just seemed to be wiped away, leaving him with just the moment to enjoy. All he knew was that she was becoming increasingly more important to him, and he was glad for it. He enjoyed spending time with her more than he could have imagined. She was just fun to be around. They talked about a lot of serious things, but she always found a way to keep things light and in perspective. She could always make him laugh. And that wasn't even taking into account the times when they were just hanging out and having fun.

That night, as always, Harry sorted through his new memories to store in the various trunks in his mind. When he was putting the memory in its proper place, he did something that he had only done with a select few of his other memories. He duplicated the memory and stored it once in its proper place and the other in a special trunk. A trunk that only had a couple memories stored within. A trunk where he stored the thoughts he used when conjuring a Patronus.

The next week passed by quickly enough. Harry spent most of his time either reading or training. He gave up his metamorphagus training for the time being because he wasn't making any progress on anything beyond hair growth. He went back to his usual subjects of

study: wards (he was reading a book on the Fidelius charm), healing charms (dealing with broken bones was next), and defense.

Saturday morning arrived before he knew it, and he was feeling a bit melancholic about the day. He wished that he were playing in the game today, but he knew that it wasn't the end of the world. He made an effort to put on a brave face as he wished the team good luck at breakfast. The team marched out to head down to the pitch early halfway through the meal, and Harry was gazing longingly at their backs.

"You really miss it, don't you?" Hermione said from the seat next to his, laying a hand on his arm.

"I do love to play, but it really isn't the end of the world," Harry told her, turning to look her in the face. "I wish I could be going out there today, but it's more than just that. I mean, last year I was banned from Quidditch by Umbridge. It was terrible but not entirely unexpected. She hates me. What's Ron's excuse? We're supposed to be friends, and he just chucked me off the team without good reason. How am I supposed to feel about that?"

"I'm sure he'll come around soon, Harry," she said comfortingly. "He's just been under a lot of stress with this game. I'll bet he apologizes to you by the end of the night." She paused a moment then added, "Assuming they win, of course."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "If we lose he'll probably blame it on me and get even angrier."

Hermione just patted his arm in a comforting gesture but didn't disagree with him. "Well nobody else will blame you, Harry."

"I certainly hope not," Harry returned.

"No worries there, Harry," Neville piped in from across the table. "We all know that you'd be out there if you could. Ron's just a stubborn git sometimes."

“Well said, Neville,” Harry said with a straight face. “It’s great to have such good friends by my side.”

They left for the pitch shortly after that to get good seats. It was still a weird and depressing experience for Harry, walking into the stands rather than the changing rooms at the pitch on the day of a Gryffindor match. This was the third match in a row with him acting as spectator rather than player. It was also the third time ever, since he had been named the seeker before the first game in his first year.

At least for the last two games he could direct his enmity at Umbridge whom he absolutely detested. Now he only had his supposed best friend to thank for his current situation. The thought only brought on a renewed bout of anger at Ron. Harry wanted to be out on the field with them, and it was only Ron’s stupidity that was keeping him on the sidelines.

After a short time, the announcer’s voice drifted across the pitch. “Good afternoon everybody. This is Adam Cleary, taking over the announcing job from Lee Jordan who graduated last year. This is shaping up to be a great game, much like the one we saw last week between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The most shocking news going into the game is the absence of Harry Potter from Gryffindor’s ranks.

“Potter was just recently reinstated on the team after missing the final two games last year because he was banned by Umbridge.” A chorus of boos followed her name. “Yes, yes, I think it’s safe to say that we were all happy to see her gone. Potter was put back on the team in his seeker spot at the beginning of the term, but team captain Ron Weasley kicked him off after refusing to show up to one of the practices two weeks ago. I’ve heard from sources in Gryffindor that Weasley scheduled the practice during one of the classes that Potter is teaching this year and demanded that Potter cancel the class or be kicked off the team.

“Needless to say Potter chose his class over Quidditch. I’m not sure of the wisdom of Weasley’s decision. Potter has only ever lost one game that he’s played in, and in all fairness he was attacked by Dementors during that game. One has to wonder whether the power

of the captaincy has gone to Weasley's head. If Gryffindor loses this game, I wouldn't be surprised if he's asked to resign from the captain's spot.

"Gryffindor and Slytherin share a legendary rivalry, so this game promises to be heated and hard fought. Here comes the Slytherin team now with Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Harper, Baddock, Triers, and captain Draco Malfoy." The announcement was met with boos from three-fourths of the stadium. Loud cheers rang out from the green and silver clad members of Slytherin.

"And now we have the starting Gryffindor team with Weasley, Kirke, Sloper, Bell, Owens, Torrent, and captain Ron Weasley." The Slytherins' boos were drowned out by the cheering ringing throughout the rest of the stadium. "And the teams are stationed in the center of the pitch. Captains Weasley and Malfoy are shaking hands. Madame Hooch has released the snitch, and she is about to toss the quaffle up. We are underway!"

"Katie Bell of Gryffindor has snatched the quaffle and is streaking towards the Slytherin goalposts. She ducks a bludger shot at her by Crabbe and passes off to Owens. Owens grabs the quaffle and ducks under an opposing chaser. She is approaching Nott in the goal. She makes a move to the left, Nott moves to intercept, but Owens fires a rocket to teammate Bell who easily puts the ball through the right hoop. Ten-nothing to Gryffindor."

The game started off in Gryffindor's favor. Katie and Stephanie were working great as a team. Nate was noticeably nervous and was taking awhile to get into the swing of the game. The Slytherins' taunts were not helping his nerves any, nor were the repeated attempts by Crabbe and Goyle to unseat him off his broom. Ron managed to stop the first couple shots on goal, and soon enough Gryffindor was leading 30-0.

The good fortune was not meant to last, however. As expected, Malfoy was pulling out all the stops in an effort to defeat Gryffindor. Their beaters and chasers were often taking cheap shots at Gryffindor's chasers and seeker when Madame Hooch was not

looking. Malfoy hung around Ron as Harper streaked toward the goal with the quaffle. Harry could only imagine what Malfoy was saying to Ron in order to distract him, but he couldn't fault the strategy, aside from the fact that it was unsportsmanlike. Ron took himself out of the play as he dove and over committed himself on Harper's fake. The score was now 30-10.

Whether it was the first miss or whatever it was that Malfoy said to him, Ron's confidence suffered after that, allowing Slytherin to quickly gain the advantage. Gryffindor's chasers were still fighting hard, but all the cheap shots were eventually adding up. And Nate's nerves and lack of experience effectively made him more of a liability than anything. He had trouble holding onto the quaffle any time a bludger or a Slytherin player drew close. Katie was playing her heart out, completely used to the dirty play of the Slytherin team, and Stephanie was also playing admirably for her first real game experience. But they were at a distinct advantage.

Ron still managed to block a good chunk of the shots on goal, but the score quickly climbed to 110-60 in favor of Slytherin. The snitch had yet to make an appearance, but that didn't mean that the seekers were bored. Malfoy never let an opportunity go by to shout taunts at any nearby Gryffindor players, and he seemed quite fond of brushing brooms with Ginny. Ginny, for her part, was busy dodging bludgers and throwing elbows at Malfoy any time he drew in close. Harry was immensely glad he lent her his Firebolt as he saw her using its acceleration to avoid injury.

Play continued on in that vein, and the score was 180-80 Slytherin when the snitch made its first appearance. Ginny spotted it high in the sky not far from her current location. She took off without warning, and quickly closed in on the golden ball. The snitch shot off as Ginny approached, but it was no match for the speed of the Firebolt. After about 30 seconds of chase, Ginny's fingers closed around the winged ball and the match was over.

As Ginny pumped her fist in the air in triumph holding up the snitch for all to see, Harry grinned widely. His smile was interrupted, however, when moments later a green and silver blur barreled directly into Ginny from behind. Harry could see her look of surprise

as she slid right off the broom, which she had only been gripping with her legs during her celebration. She was a good 50 meters off the ground when she fell, but the distance was rapidly closing.

Harry sprung into action before he even had a conscious thought about it. He was already casting the spell as his wand was sliding out of its holster. Since the wand was more of a formality and to avoid awkward questions, it didn't really matter to him. He didn't really think about what he was casting, only that he needed to stop Ginny's descent and bring her to safety. His magic apparently interpreted safety to mean in his arms, for her downward fall stopped when she was halfway to the ground, and she began floating towards the Gryffindor stands as Harry was jumping down the stairs to the edge.

She flew right into his arms, and he held onto her tightly as her own arms snaked around his neck and clutched his back in a death grip. She was shaking uncontrollably as the realization set in of what could have been. And she held onto Harry for dear life. Harry, for his part, didn't seem to mind that at all, for he was content to hold onto her for the rest of the day. His heart was still pounding wildly in his chest as the adrenaline of the last minute still coursed through his veins.

As he stood there holding Ginny to his chest, he couldn't help but think of those he had already lost, his mother and father, Cedric, and Sirius. He didn't think he could take another loss, especially not one so close to home. And the thought just made him clutch her even tighter.

It was a long minute before either one of them even became aware of anything that was going on around them. They both had closed their eyes as they held each other tightly. Harry finally opened his eyes and noticed the crowd around them, all looking rather unsure of how to approach them. A deep blush suffused his cheeks, but he shook off his embarrassment as best he could as he returned his focus to the red haired girl in his arms. "Are you alright?" he asked her softly.

She nodded into his shoulder before uttering, "Uh huh." But she didn't loosen her grip.

“You’re not hurt or anything? You took a pretty big hit at the end, and you had a couple hits during the game as well,” Harry said, concern bleeding through his voice.

“I’m okay,” she said into his shoulder. “I just need a minute.”

“Take your time,” he told her honestly. “That was a great catch, by the way. Malfoy didn’t stand a chance. You were brilliant out there today. Couldn’t have done much better myself.” He was hoping that getting her to think about something other than her fall would help ease her fears.

“Thanks,” she replied. She held on for another moment before finally easing up her grip and backing up a step. Her hand flew up to her mouth as another realization dawned on her. “Oh no, your Firebolt. Is it alright? It’s not broken is it? Oh, I just knew something like this would happen. I’m so sorry, Harry. I’ll find some way to make it up to you.”

“Shh,” Harry said, holding a finger to her lips. “I don’t know what happened to the broom. I could care less about the broom right now. My only concern is you. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine,” she told him.

“Now see, any time I tell people I’m fine, I just get yelled at for lying,” Harry pouted playfully, which earned him a giggle.

“That’s because your definition of fine is ‘not dead,’” she retorted with something akin to her usual cheekiness.

Harry just huffed in mock indignation. But any further conversation was halted as the crowd around them finally descended upon them. They were all intent on congratulating both of them for their catches, Ginny for her catch of the snitch, and Harry for his catch of Ginny. Ginny told him that she was heading for the changing rooms as they began to get separated, and he called back that he’d see her in the Common Room.

With that, Harry did his best to break away from the crowd to get back to the castle. He really needed a moment alone to calm down from the emotions of the day, plus he had a party to attend to. Not only did he have three kegs of butterbeer to serve, but he had also talked to Dobby earlier in the week about arranging some refreshments to be served after the game. Harry wanted to duck into the kitchens really quickly to make sure everything was okay, then get up to the Common Room to get everything set up.

Two pairs of eyes followed him as he made his exit, the minds behind them pondering the same thing. How did he do it? Dumbledore knew from experience how hard it was to catch someone in mid-fall. There had been more than one time throughout his years as Headmaster where a student had fallen or been knocked off a broom. He had always been quick enough to slow their descent before impact, and once he had managed to completely stop the student's fall, but in all fairness he had been much higher up in the air giving Dumbledore a few extra seconds to react, and even then it had been no easy task.

When Miss Weasley had been knocked off her broom, Dumbledore sprung into action, but by the time he got to casting a spell, she was already saved. It didn't take him long to spot Harry amidst the crowd, wand outstretched, rushing out to meet young Ginevra. He couldn't help but wonder how Harry was so quick to respond, nor could he help marveling at the power and control the boy displayed of his magic. That he managed to stop her descent and, for lack of a better term, summon her to him without causing her any harm was a remarkable feat, especially for one so young.

Perhaps Harry was beginning to come into his own. He had been hearing from his professors, save for Severus, about Harry's vast improvement this year. The Headmaster couldn't help but find himself interested in just how far Harry had come along, and just how far he would go.

Hermione was thinking along a similar vein. She had been sitting right next to Harry during the game, and she had watched from beside him as Ginny fell towards the Earth, momentarily paralyzed from shock and fear along with the rest of her classmates. When Ginny began to

slow down, she came back to herself and noticed that Harry was no longer beside her. She had never even seen him move.

When Ginny finally made it safely into his arms, she watched with the rest of the house as the two held onto each other for dear life. She couldn't fault them for their reaction given the nature of the situation, but she, like everyone else, began to grow uncomfortable as the two continued to embrace, lost to the rest of the world. As she continued to watch the pair, she wondered how he had managed it. She couldn't say from personal experience, but she had read enough to know how difficult it was to completely stop somebody in a freefall. She had even watched three years ago when Dumbledore had only been able to slow Harry down when Dementors had attacked him in the air.

If Dumbledore couldn't stop Harry completely, then how did Harry manage to stop Ginny? He had been doing a lot of incredible things lately in classes, catching onto spells with ease and showing great skill without too much effort, whereas in past years he had always struggled before mastering a spell. He had shown a complete turnaround, and Hermione could not explain it. But without any leads to go off of, there was little she could do. Her brain continued to churn as Harry and Ginny stood there completely oblivious to their audience.

She was looking into Harry's face when he finally opened his eyes and realized the spectacle they were making. She watched as recognition dawned and the blush crept up his face. But she saw him squash it down and tune out everyone around him as he began whispering to Ginny. Hermione couldn't hear what he was saying; she could only guess that he was trying to make sure she was all right. She could see the concern and the fear on his face, but she also saw something else she hadn't expected to see. Affection. She knew that the two of them had grown closer lately, but Hermione hadn't noticed the extent of it.

She had never seen that look on Harry's face before, but she couldn't say she was entirely surprised. She had seen this coming, after all, and had tried to warn Ginny off. Harry was clinging to her. He'd lost the person who meant the most to him in this world, and he needed someone to transfer the title to, someone to put all his hopes and

dreams onto, and Ginny fit the bill perfectly. She was great: beautiful, funny, intelligent, a great friend, but most of all, she was willing to put up with Harry's charade, and unwilling to confront him about what was bothering him.

She wished she could be happy for her two friends, but she knew it was doomed to fail. It was sad, really, because she always thought that they could have been great together under the right circumstances. She resolved to have another talk with Ginny about that some time, before things went too far.

OoOoO

Rather than celebrate with the rest of his team and his entire house, Ron hung back and watched. His team had just won the first game of the season under his leadership. He was the captain of the team. He designed all of their plays and strategies, though he had Harry's help a lot of the time. But nobody noticed his absence; he tried not to be bothered by that. Their attention was all riveted on two people: his sister, Ginny, and his best friend, Harry.

For once in his life, Ron didn't begrudge either of them their limelight. Ron was the leader of the team, and they won under his leadership, but it wasn't his leadership that won them this game. Ginny won them the game. Had she not caught the snitch when she did, the score would have continued to favor Slytherin, and it wouldn't have been long before a victory was outside of their reach. It was his leadership that put them in a position that could have easily led to their defeat.

He had let in eighteen goals. And his chasers had only managed to score eight. He couldn't blame them, though. He had taken away part of their team and ruined the rhythm that the three girls had been building up over the past couple months. He had underestimated Slytherin and should have lost the game. And he would have if his sister hadn't bailed him out on his best friend's broom.

The first practice after he'd kicked Harry off the team had been horrendous. After that the team had worked hard to adjust to the change he'd forced on them. Not that they'd had much of anything to

say to him. He didn't know why they started trying in practice again, but he thanked his lucky stars that they had.

One evening this past week he'd been in the captain's office supposedly working on plays but in reality he was missing Harry, when he'd overheard some of the reserve players talking. The guy they'd been talking about had sounded like a bloody prat, it had taken a few minutes for him to figure out they were talking about him and how he'd treated Harry.

Ron was willing to confess that he probably shouldn't have thrown Harry off the team. He had already admitted as much. Not out loud, of course, but in his head. He knew he had made a mistake. He should have crawled on his hands and knees when he realized this and begged Harry to forgive him and rejoin the team, yet he hadn't. No, he'd decided it could wait until things blew over a bit, then admit that he might have been out of line, and everything could go back to the way it was. He'd made some pretty big mistakes before in his friendship with Harry and Harry had always forgiven him, so he wasn't that worried about it.

That's what he had been thinking for the past week. They would win the game despite Harry's absence, everyone would be in high spirits, it would be a perfect time to get it over with. It had sounded like a good plan at the time, but then again, anything that put it off until later probably would've sounded good at the time. Now that he was facing the prospect of actually having to go through with it, he was having second thoughts.

It didn't help that Harry had just saved his sister's life, and not for the first time. He was incredibly happy that Harry had saved Ginny, but it certainly made him feel worse about the situation. Now that the game was over and the pressure lifted, Ron couldn't help reflecting back on the argument that had led to his and Harry's estrangement. Harry had told him that he had to realize that some things were more important than Quidditch.

His sister's close call was a forceful reminder of what Hermione had been trying to tell him for two weeks now and what was at stake in the world right now. People were dying. There were attacks reported

every morning in the Daily Prophet, and the entire castle was restless and feeling helpless. Ron knew, once again thanks to Hermione, that Harry's classes were a way for him to feel useful in the war, to feel like he was actually doing something. And if all the effort managed to save just one life, he knew that Harry would think it all worth the effort. Ron couldn't say he disagreed with that viewpoint.

Ron left the pitch and entered the changing rooms with mixed emotions. He was still a bit bothered by how he'd failed the team, and he also couldn't help but notice how much he missed a rousing chorus of "Weasley is Our King" being sung in his honor by the Gryffindor fans. But on the bright side they had won, he'd seen Malfoy being chewed out by Madam Hooch for what he'd done to Ginny, and after a quick apology he'd have his best friend back. With that thought in mind he decided he couldn't wait to get back to the tower, surely someone would see to making sure they had a bloody great party to celebrate the victory.

Chapter 11: Of Parties and Confrontations

As Harry rushed back to the castle to make sure everything was ready for the party, his mind drifted back to what had happened at the end of the match. He had nearly lost Ginny and if he was honest with himself he couldn't imagine his life without her in it anymore. Each time he thought of what could have happened his stomach bottomed out and he'd catch his hands starting to shake. The more he thought about it the more bothered he became and the faster he walked. He was brought to a sudden stop when it occurred to him that he wasn't even sure who or what had knocked her off the broom. He had been so consumed with making sure she was safe and unhurt that until that moment he hadn't given any thought to what had caused her to fall.

Harry stopped abruptly and turned on his heel to stalk back out to the pitch, robes billowing behind him in a very Snape-like manner. As he walked he began listing the hexes and curses he could use on the Slytherin that had come so close to hurting Ginny. He stopped again when he remembered that Ginny wasn't hurt, that she was fine and more importantly that she would want to be a part of making them pay for their transgressions. Besides, he knew that whatever she came up with would be ten times worse than whatever he would do. She really did have a bit of a wicked streak in her.

Eventually, Harry continued on to the kitchens, where Bobbin, the head house elf, assured him that everything was fine. Dobby would be bringing up the food in a few minutes. Bobbin asked for his forbearance since it would take Dobby several trips to bring up all the food. Before Harry could ask, Bobbin explained that because of the 'clothes' issue the other elves were still reluctant to help in the tower. Luckily Harry was able to quickly convince some of the other elves that there would be no clothes left around to put them in danger and some of them agreed to help Dobby.

When Harry finally returned to the tower it was virtually empty, as most Gryffindors were too busy celebrating on the pitch to hurry back inside. After the struggle he'd had in the last half hour or so, he was glad to have some time to get a hold of himself. After taking a few deep breaths, Harry was able to set things up without interruption. He

only took out two of the kegs of butterbeer out of his trunk to start, figuring he'd pull the third one out only if it was needed. As soon as he got the two kegs in position, a loud crack announced the arrival of Dobby and the other house elves, who quickly threw together several tables full of food, ranging from sandwiches to crisps to various desserts. They had once again outdone themselves.

Hearing the sound of a crowd of students out in the hall approaching the portrait, Harry surveyed the tables set up in front of him. The house elves had done a good job and had included plates to eat the food on. As he glanced over at his kegs, he realized that he hadn't given any thought to what everybody would drink out of. There wasn't really any room to place a bunch of goblets anywhere, so Harry put his muggle upbringing to good use by conjuring a couple stacks of plastic cups. He was confident that the conjured items would last throughout the night, as he was now consistently conjuring items that would last for over a week when he wanted them to.

Harry had migrated over to a secluded corner of the room, as the portrait hole burst open, allowing the crowd of Gryffindors to pour into the Common Room. He wasn't really in the mood for a celebration. He was content to just watch as the other students entered and headed straight for the food and drinks. Without Fred and George around this year, nobody had any reason to fear that it may have been tampered with.

The noise level continued to rise as more and more students piled in. Neville and Hermione eventually made their way through the crowd in the Common Room. When they spotted Harry, they headed over.

"Hey guys," he greeted them.

"Where did all of that come from?" Hermione asked him, gesturing to the tables of food and drink.

"Isn't it obvious?" Neville responded before Harry had a chance.

"Well I'm guessing the food came from the kitchens, but they don't serve butterbeer," Hermione reasoned out. "And there wasn't time for

anyone to sneak off into Hogsmeade to get it even with the aid of an invisibility cloak and map.”

“No, they don’t serve butterbeer in the castle, and you’re right there hasn’t been time since the match ended, but you might remember a few weeks back when a certain Gryffindor friend of yours was eager to get into Hogsmeade alone before anyone else in the school. I’m guessing that Harry was purchasing the butterbeer and trying to keep the whole thing a secret. Right, Harry?” Neville explained, finally turning towards Harry as he finished.

Harry cocked an eyebrow at Neville. “Dead on, mate. Good show.” He slapped Neville on the shoulder. “And I thought you were supposed to be the smart one,” he teased, turning his attention to Hermione. “Neville here is giving you a run for your money.”

“I don’t know about that,” Neville grinned. “She does have five years of experience in the position. It’ll be difficult to usurp her.”

“Oh, you two,” Hermione huffed. “You’d think that without Ron around, things might get a little more mature. I’m going to go get something to eat.”

Harry and Neville laughed as Hermione walked away. The portrait hole opened again, and the Quidditch team entered to tumultuous applause. Their faces turned various shades of red as all the attention was fixed on the seven players.

Harry and Neville hung back as the rest of the students converged on the team. “They look a little overwhelmed,” Neville commented idly after a moment.

Harry nodded, “Yeah, Katie’s the only one who’s really used to it. The rest haven’t played more than a couple games each, and Nate and Stephanie have never gone through this before. So it’s only natural they’d react that way. It takes some getting used to believe me. I don’t think I’ve ever really gotten used to it.”

“You’re handling it alright this year,” Neville remarked. “I mean, I know you haven’t faced that this year,” he gestured out toward the still cheering students, “but you’ve still been in the spotlight quite a bit, what with teaching your classes and all.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “That’s different, but at the same time similar. It’s easier in class because I have a lesson to teach. There’s a reason I’m in the center of attention. Times like this I never know what I’m supposed to do.”

The two watched the team’s progress. Harry watched as Ron attempted to make the rounds and play up their first win under his captaincy. Most of the students Ron approached appeared to find someone else they needed to talk to and no one approached him.

Noticing the direction of Harry’s gaze, Neville commented, “It doesn’t seem that the win earned him any forgiveness in the house.”

Harry didn’t acknowledge the statement for a moment, as they both watched Ron with Hermione at his side retreat to a corner of the room. “Have you noticed that they haven’t really argued since Ron kicked me off the team?”

“They’ve definitely been spending quite a bit of time together, in fact they seem to be growing closer,” commented Neville.

With a shrug Harry replied, “I’m not sure what to make of the whole situation at this point. My feelings about the two of them are so mixed up right now,”

“That’s understandable. Maybe Ron’s just been so busy being a complete prat to you that he hasn’t had time to direct his pratishness at anyone else,” Neville suggested.

“You know,” Harry commented with a smile, “you might just be right. I think the one good thing that could come of all this is if they finally just get together.”

“Yeah,” Neville agreed, “but it just doesn’t seem right to me. I can see why Ron would flock to Hermione right now since most of the house is mad at him, but why is Hermione just pretending that Ron didn’t do anything wrong?”

“I’ve asked myself that same question,” Harry admitted. “I think it’s mainly because he’s finally treating her like a girl. She’s been waiting for this for years and doesn’t want to blow it. I overheard her turning down Justin Finch-Fletchley in the hall the other day. She’s hoping Ron will ask her to the ball, and she doesn’t want to risk that over our fight.”

“That’s not right,” Neville said with disgust. “Sometimes I just think that those two deserve each other, and not necessarily in a good way. On the other hand it should be worth a laugh or two for the rest of us as they attempt to settle into couple-hood,” continued Neville as he turned to Harry with a grin on his round face.

Harry laughed out loud. “So what about you, Neville? You have a date for the ball yet?”

A small blush crept up Neville’s face and neck, but it was a testament to his newly found self-confidence that he was able to respond without a single stutter. “Yes, I asked Hannah Abbot after Herbology on Thursday.”

“Good on you, mate,” Harry congratulated him cheerfully. “She’s a cute one, and she does pretty well in HA.”

“She’s really good in Herbology too,” Neville eagerly added.

“Even better,” Harry returned. “You looking forward to the ball then?”

“Well, the ball yes, but the dancing not so much,” Neville replied with a grimace.

Harry couldn’t help but second the notion. In all his focus to make sure he had the right date to the ball, he hadn’t even thought of the

dancing aspect of it. He didn't want to end up stepping all over Ginny's toes or just sitting around the entire night. He would have to think about that more later. "Good point," Harry finally replied understandingly. "Do you want to sit with Ginny and I for dinner?"

"Yeah, that would be great," Neville answered happily. "I'll have to check with Hannah of course, but I don't think she'll mind at all."

"Great," Harry replied. "I suppose I should okay it with Ginny as well, but I can guarantee she won't have a problem with it."

"Speaking of dates for the ball..." Neville remarked gesturing back towards the corner occupied by Ron and Hermione. Sure enough, as Harry looked over he noticed the two of them in an embrace. He could see Ron's face, and it was obvious what had just happened based on the stupid grin his friend was sporting.

"Well, it's about time," Harry said after a moment, turning away from the two. He wanted to let them have their moment of privacy, and at the same time he wasn't particularly in the mood to share in their happiness.

Neville seemed to pick up on Harry's mood and let the subject drop. After a moment Neville noticed a somewhat sizeable crowd of people and commented, "I wonder what that's all about," pointing it out to Harry.

Harry looked at the crowd for a long moment. "I don't know....Wait," he said, spotting a familiar shade of red hair towards the middle. "I think I see Ginny in the middle." Seeing her brought forth a slew of emotions in Harry. The mere thought of what had nearly happened earlier in the day was enough to resurrect his anger at whoever had almost hurt her earlier. "So who was the git who knocked her off her broom?" Harry asked Neville as he continued to keep a tight reign on his emotions.

Neville looked back at him, completely shocked, "You mean you don't know?"

“I was so focused on getting her to safety that I didn’t even notice who knocked her off her broom,” Harry explained.

Nodding his head to show he understood Neville answered, “It was Malfoy.” When Harry’s head whipped around to face him, he continued. “When we all left the pitch, Madam Hooch as well as Professors McGonagall, Snape and Dumbledore were still yelling at him. Actually Madam Hooch and Professor McGonagall were doing most of the yelling. Snape kept trying to say that Malfoy had just overshot his aim for the snitch.”

“Do we know what is going to happen to him?” asked Harry, his voice bristling with anger.

“Not at this point, though if McGonagall has her way he’ll never see another Quidditch pitch. That is one witch I never want to make that angry.” Neville replied. He paused then continued looking Harry in the eye. “To be perfectly honest I think I’d rather make McGonagall that angry than you. I have to tell you mate; the look in your eye is downright lethal. Maybe they should bring Malfoy to see you right now as part of his punishment. The look in your eyes would be enough to scare anyone back onto the straight and narrow.” Neville half joked.

Harry just shook his head and grinned ruefully in reply. “In all honesty I’m not the one he should be scared of.”

“Ron?” asked Neville.

“Nope,” answered Harry, he paused then continued, “Ginny. Can you imagine what she’s going to do to him? Remember Ron’s heart covered robes; believe me he got off light in the end. Some of the things she came up with would make the twins pranks seem tame.”

Harry continued to watch her to reassure himself that she was fine. He felt a surge of warmth flow through him as he watched her gesture animatedly while telling some story or another. He knew he cared for Ginny but his fear that he could have lost her had nearly overwhelmed him at several points this afternoon. Not since finding

out about the planned attack on his friends in Diagon Alley over the summer had he been this scared, and even that hadn't elicited the extremes in emotion that this afternoon had.

Neville let loose a low whistle. "She gathers quite the crowd," he commented as he too continued to watch Ginny.

"You're not kidding," Harry returned after a moment. "You notice the male to female proportion of the crowd?" A sly smirk slid across his lips.

Neville scanned the group for a moment, "I can't say I see any girls," he responded.

"I see one, besides Ginny," Harry added helpfully.

"There has to be at least a dozen guys, maybe closer to two," Neville stated unbelievably.

"Yeah. Can't say I'm too surprised," Harry responded thinking on it. "Ginny has a great personality. The fact that she's gorgeous doesn't hurt either." Harry was a bit amazed at the fact that his best friend was so beautiful, as he tended to overlook what she looked like in favor of how she treated him. But now that he was noticing, well there was a lot to notice. She was on the short side, and she had a mostly slim, athletic build, but there were curves underneath that, really very nice curves. Some of her mother's roundness seemed to have rubbed off on her, but at the same time she was in great shape. It made for quite a fetching combination.

Her red hair was definitely a striking feature. Harry had noticed recently that it was darker than her brothers' hair. Their hair was more the color of a bright flame, but hers was a deeper, more vibrant red. He had to shake himself as he suddenly had a strong urge to find out just what it would feel like to run his fingers through it. She had a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. It wasn't excessive, but certainly noticeable.

But her attractiveness went far beyond her physical appearance. She was just fun to be around. Her personality drew people in. Harry knew that he certainly felt that pull. The more he got to know her, the more he liked her. This past couple weeks should have been absolutely terrible for him. Ron had barely spoken a word to him and was being an incredible prat. He and Hermione were on shaky ground as well. But despite that, he hadn't been down. That day they had gone flying together the previous weekend had been one of the most enjoyable experiences of his life, in the midst of all his troubles. He couldn't think of anybody else who could have done that for him.

"You don't seem to be bothered by the attention she's getting," Neville observantly remarked.

Harry shrugged. Why should he be? "Can't say that I am on the whole. Ginny can take care of herself," he replied easily.

"On the whole? That suggests that there's something or someone in particular bugging you," Neville prodded casually.

Harry cocked an eyebrow as he gave his friend a sidelong glance. Neville just smirked. "Look at how Dean is looking at her; I guess that just reminds me of something he said awhile back..." Harry started.

"What's that?" Neville asked with a mix of curiosity and concern.

Harry gave Neville an abridged version of the events that led to Harry's discussion with Dean about why Ron was upset with him at the beginning of term and Dean's subsequent comments. As he spun his tale, Harry couldn't help wondering at his reaction. Why should he feel the need to protect her? She was certainly capable of looking after herself. He criticized Ron for doing things like that, so it was a bit unreasonable for him to turn around and do the same. But then, he didn't really have a problem with the other guys hanging around Ginny, so he figured it was just because of the suggestive comment the boy had made. Ginny was his best friend, after all. So it was natural that he'd want to look after her.

After finishing the tale he amended, "I mean, I know she can take care of herself and all, I'm not worried about that. The way he said it just bugged me; in all honesty it makes me want to drag him away from her. I'm not turning into Ron or something, am I?"

"Nah, Ron would have punched Dean the second he said it," Neville told him. "I don't think it's anything you really need to worry about. Dean seems like he's mostly all talk. And as you said, Ginny is more than capable of taking care of herself."

Harry nodded. "I know."

The two chatted idly about the various goings on of the party around them for a few minutes when Neville brought up something that was obviously bugging him. "I still cannot believe Ron really didn't let you play today. I mean, I know he kicked you off the team and all, but I expected him to realize his mistake and apologize to you before now."

"I don't know what to tell you, Neville," Harry said holding his arms out wide. "Things haven't exactly been good between us all term. I've tried to keep the peace between us, but that obviously didn't work."

"You can't blame yourself for that, Harry," Neville told him honestly. "Ron was way out of line, and not just this time. He had no right to try to take advantage of your authority in your classes. He just assumed you'd give him free rein, like Snape does with Malfoy. With how Ron's been acting, he might be able to pass for a Malfoy, but I certainly can't see you as turning into Snape."

"Thanks, I think," Harry replied.

Neville laughed. "You know what I mean. My point is, there was nothing you could do to avoid this, short of letting Ron walk all over you. And frankly, I don't think I could've continued to respect you if you did that, and I don't think any of the other students would've either."

“Thanks, Neville. That means a lot to me. You really are a great friend,” Harry told him earnestly.

“It’s strange, I never thought I’d see the day where you were getting along better with me than with Ron or Hermione. I thought you guys were inseparable. I’ve always envied you three a bit. You did everything together and were always there for each other. Plus you were always at the center of all the action, saving the day,” Neville mused aloud.

“Neville, you know we never meant to exclude you or anything. I’ve always liked you, there was just always so much going on that....”

“Don’t worry about it, Harry,” Neville interrupted. “I don’t blame you for that. I was too shy and quiet. You guys did try to include me on occasion, and I appreciated that, but I just wasn’t ready at the time.”

“You really have matured a lot in the last year, you know that?” Harry asked.

“I think that’s the pot calling the cauldron black,” Neville returned with a smile.

“Why would a pot go and do something as silly as that?” asked a female voice.

“Well you know how pots can be,” Neville quipped. “Always prejudiced against cauldrons, talking down to them.”

“I didn’t know Percy was a pot,” Ginny remarked casually. “That explains so much.”

Harry snorted. Neville looked back and forth between the two of them. “Am I missing something here?”

Harry just shrugged at him. Ginny replied with, “Oh nothing much. Just my stupid brother’s obsession with cauldron bottoms, which led to his voluntary exile from the family?”

“How did an obsession with cauldron bottoms lead to that?” Neville asked incredulously.

Before Ginny could reply, Harry hastily inserted, “She means his job. When Percy first got a job in the ministry he was doing some report on cauldron bottoms. And it was his job at the ministry that led to him leaving his family.”

“Oh,” Neville replied thoughtfully. “Well, sorry?” he said to Ginny.

“Nothing to apologize for. He’s the prat, not you,” Ginny returned.

Neville nodded absently. “Well, I think I’ll leave the two of you to catch up and grab some food. Thanks for setting all this up, Harry. It was really good of you, particularly after everything that happened.”

Ginny cocked an eyebrow as Harry blushed lightly. “It was nothing. The house elves did most of the work with the food. I just brought some butterbeer.”

“Which is a lot more than anyone else did. Besides, who arranged for the house elves to make food for us?” Neville fired back, chuckling lightly as he began to head over to the aforementioned food and drink.

Harry stopped him. “Before you wonder off Neville, let me ask Ginny about the seating arrangements at the ball.” He turned back to Ginny when Neville nodded his head. “Ginny, Neville and I were talking about the ball earlier and we were thinking that you and I could sit with him and Hannah during the dinner, if that is ok with both of you?”

Ginny rolled her eyes at him. “That sounds like a great idea. Actually I was going to see if Luna and her date could sit with us as well, if that’s all right?”

Harry glanced back at Neville. “Do you think that Hannah would mind sitting with Luna, her mystery date, Ginny and I?”

“I don’t think so; she gets along really well with Luna during HA, but I’ll check with her first thing in the morning and let you know.” With

that Neville once again started to head towards the food. He looked back over his shoulder, "Thanks again Harry."

Ginny watched Neville walk away before turning back to Harry. "So you're the one who set this all up?"

Harry groaned. "I brought the butterbeer. The house elves provided the food."

"Well thank you for that," Ginny said simply.

"You had quite the fan club over there," Harry said, effectively changing the conversation.

She blushed prettily at the unexpected comment. "Oh, well, I don't know that I'd call them a fan club or anything. I mean, really they just wanted to talk about the match. You know how that goes."

"Uh huh. And it just happened to be a coincidence that you were surrounded by a large group of guys. Plenty of girls are interested in Quidditch too, you know," Harry teased mercilessly.

"They weren't all guys," she retorted defensively.

"You're right. I counted two girls, and you were one of them," Harry countered.

"And why are you paying so much attention? Jealous?" she said in an attempt to turn the tables.

"Only curious," he responded dryly. "Just wondering if you were enjoying the attention. You had every one of those guys eating out of the palm of your hand." Harry found that he really was curious, despite the fact that he was only teasing her. She could probably have her pick of that group of guys, and for the first time Harry wondered if maybe she would rather be going to the ball with one of them instead of him. He wondered if she was interested in anybody.

“Well considering I broke away from them to come talk to you, I would think that would be enough to answer your question.”

“Fair enough,” Harry replied, deciding to drop the subject before he made her angry. “And I’m glad you did.”

“Good.”

“So what did you come to talk to me about?” he asked her curiously as he leaned against the back of a chair.

“I wanted to say thank you. I don’t remember doing so back on the pitch,” she told him, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing gently. “You’re really starting to rack up life debts that I owe you. At this rate I’ll be repaying them for the rest of my life.” As she said it, Harry noticed she started to blush

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Harry told her seriously, though he couldn’t figure out what had embarrassed her. “You gave me quite a fright out there. I don’t think I could handle losing you right now.”

She slipped her arm around his waist and gave him a one armed hug. “Well as long as I have you looking out for me, I’m sure I won’t be going anywhere any time soon. You do have a knack for saving my life.”

Harry snuck an arm around her side and gave her a slight squeeze in return. “All in a day’s work,” he joked. “After all, I am the savior of the Wizarding World, right?”

“I don’t know about the rest of the Wizarding World, but you have certainly made a habit of being my personal savior. And I can’t ever thank you enough,” she responded only half jokingly.

“You do more for me than you think, Gin. I don’t know how I would’ve survived these past two weeks if not for you,” he told her seriously, looking down into her eyes. Their arms were still loosely wrapped around each other, though neither seemed to be entirely

aware of this. Or if they were, they weren't in any hurry to change the situation.

"What are friends for, Harry?" she said with a small smile. They remained silent for a moment before she spoke again in a much more serious tone. "I have something I need to tell you, Harry." Her voice sounded small and timid, completely unlike how she normally sounded to him.

"You can tell me anything," Harry encouraged her with a slight squeeze.

"Well it's about your Firebolt..." she started hesitantly.

Harry waved away her concern. "I told you before, I don't care about the Firebolt. The important thing is that you're okay."

She couldn't help but smile at him, though it was done a little sadly. "Well I just figured you might want to know what happened to it. Nate grabbed it from off the ground where it fell. It's not shattered or anything, but it does have a pretty big crack running down the shaft." Her voice became softer and more tentative as she explained the fate of his beloved broom.

"Don't worry about it, Ginny. It wasn't your fault that it cracked," he said as he rubbed a small circle on her lower back. "To be honest, I was thinking about buying a new broom anyway and just hanging the Firebolt up on the wall or something. For now I think I'll hang it in my office, or maybe in one of my trunk's rooms. Like you said, it's just got a crack in it, so it'll still be able to serve that purpose."

It was entirely misleading but not untruthful. He had in fact thought about replacing his Firebolt, but he had decided against it, at least for now. It didn't make much sense to do it now when the Firebolt was still the best broom on the market. But he had resolved to do so just that as soon as the next model came out.

But Harry wasn't about to tell Ginny that. The point was that if he had to choose between her and his broom he would pick her every day of

the week and twice on Sunday, so he wasn't all that bothered by the fate of his broom. He was sure that once he got over his relief that Ginny was unhurt and okay that it would bug him a bit. But he would never blame her for what happened. And he really didn't want her worrying about it.

"Well I am sorry, and if you ever want to use my broom, it's yours. I know it's nowhere near as good as a Firebolt, but it's all I have," Ginny told him sincerely.

"Thank you, but really, don't worry about it..."

"Hey Ginny," a male voice interrupted. "Come on, we need to help you settle a bet. Oh, hey Harry." Harry only nodded in reply. "I hope you don't mind if we steal Ginny away for a few minutes."

Harry's eyebrows rose to his hairline. "I believe we should let Ginny decide what she'd like to do," he said diplomatically.

Ginny sent him a grateful smile as the boy, Brian he thought his name was, began backpedaling. "O-Of course. I didn't mean it like that. Of course Ginny will decide for herself, I just..."

"Oh, shut it Brian before your foot gets stuffed too far down your throat," Ginny forcefully suggested. "I better go see what these guys want," she said to Harry. "I'll see you in a bit?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I think I'll make the rounds and congratulate the team."

"Right, see ya Harry," Ginny called out, dragging Brian by the arm to several other fifth and fourth year boys.

Harry watched her progress for a moment, eyes traveling from her hair, down her back, and to her.... Harry tore his eyes away, not wanting to stare. He scanned the crowd for his former teammates. He spotted Katie first and made his way over to the seventh year girl. As he drew near, he noticed Stephanie passing nearby. "Katie, Stephanie," he called.

Both girls looked his way. "Hey Harry." "Hi Harry." They chorused.

"I just wanted to congratulate you two; you played well out there today," Harry told them sincerely.

Both girls shook their heads. Katie spoke up first. "Nah, we couldn't keep up with them at all."

"Yeah," Stephanie agreed. "We're just lucky Ginny caught the snitch when she did; otherwise, Slytherin would have pulled too far ahead, and we'd have had no hope of catching up."

"Don't sell yourselves short," Harry told them. "Slytherin is always hard to play against. They wear you down quickly with their dirty tactics and cheap shots. You both did great to keep the score as close as it was. And at the start you were brilliant. Had Ginny been with you two, I don't think you would've had any problems keeping up with them. Nate's not bad, but he didn't get nearly enough practice time with you, and if your timing's even a little off, it ruins the entire play."

Harry continued, "He was unprepared to play. His nervousness and the Slytherins' taunting and cheap shots got into his head and affected his game. Ron should have called a time out to talk to him and calm him down. Nate effectively took himself out of the game, and you can't expect to keep up with them with only two chasers. You should be proud of yourselves for all that you managed to do. And that second goal was brilliant. You had me faked out. I had no idea where the quaffle was until it was already through the hoop."

"Thanks Harry," Katie told him sincerely.

"Yeah, thanks," Stephanie added with a wide smile.

Harry held his hands out. "No need to thank me. I'm just telling you the truth. I'm going to try to find the guys. I think Nate is going to need some reassurance. I saw him earlier, and he didn't look so good.

Keep an eye out for him, will you?" The girls nodded, and Harry bid his goodbyes.

After a couple of minutes, he found Kirke and Sloper and talked to the boys briefly about the match. He stressed that they had done well, but that the Slytherins' dirty tactics and cheap shots were unavoidable and bound to wear everyone down. The fact that they prevented any injuries was testament to the job they'd done. The two boys smiled and thanked Harry, who left on his way to search out Nate.

It took him several minutes, but he finally found the boy sitting in a secluded corner with one of his friends. "Mind if I sit?" Harry asked.

Nate glanced up and noticed who it was. If it was possible, his face just fell even more. He directed his gaze back to the ground and nodded morosely. His friend, whose name escaped Harry, said, "I think I'm going to go grab some food," leaving Harry and Nate alone.

After a long moment of silence, Harry decided not to beat around the bush. "What's the matter? Why aren't you celebrating with the rest of the house?"

Nate raised his head and stared incredulously at Harry. "Are you kidding? What have I got to celebrate? I'm the reason we almost lost the game," he lamented.

"Really?" Harry asked. The boy nodded. "So you're the one who let in 18 goals, and you were the one dishing out cheap shots to our whole team left and right, and you are the one who blocked several of our shots? That's quite impressive. I didn't know one person could do so much."

"Of course I didn't do all that," he retorted defensively.

"Then how are you the one who almost lost us the match?" Harry calmly returned.

“I played terribly. I dropped the quaffle a couple times, and I didn’t score a single goal,” he stated dejectedly.

“Well I can’t exactly dispute you on the last point,” Harry started. “But you did set Stephanie up on her second goal. That was a very nice move, by the way. You didn’t start off bad at all, but your timing was a bit off at times, which is no fault of your own. You just haven’t practiced enough with Katie and Stephanie. After a couple mistakes, you just let everything get to your head.” Harry looked at the boy and could tell he was listening, but it didn’t look like he was any closer to forgiving himself.

“Do you remember last year, how horribly Ron played in the first two games?” Harry asked him suddenly.

“Yeah,” he said with a nod.

“Do you know why he played so bad those games, while he played so well in the last game of the season?”

Nate shook his head.

“It was his attitude. Ron got too nervous, and he let the Slytherins’ comments get into his head. He went into the game thinking he would do poorly, and after every mistake he made, he berated himself and let it get him down. He played like crap because he convinced himself that he was just that bad,” Harry explained.

“But he turned that around in the last game because he just stopped thinking about it. He decided that he had nothing left to lose and stopped focusing on what everyone was saying and just played the game. You’re a good Quidditch player, that’s why we picked you. We all saw that you had talent at tryouts, and we expect you to be a starter after Katie leaves. We think you’re that good. You just have to learn to drown out the crowd and everything else and just play the game.”

Harry paused here and watched the boy in front of him. He looked thoughtful and nodded to himself a couple times as he thought over

everything Harry had just told him. Finally he looked Harry in the eye and said, "Thanks, Harry."

"Don't mention it," Harry replied easily. "Now get on out there and celebrate with your friends."

The tentative smile that Nate had formed faded. "But what if the rest of the students blame me?"

Harry waved away his concern. "They won't. Trust me. Everyone knows that you didn't have much practice time. Nobody blames you one bit for what happened. Now get on out there before I have to drag you myself."

Nate shot him a grateful smile as he stood and walked out into the hustle and bustle of the Common Room. Harry sat in the big armchair Nate had just vacated and watched as the boy was greeted by his friends who all smiled, some of them patted him on the back. After another minute, they were all laughing at something or another. Harry couldn't help the smile that overcame him. He would be all right now.

"That was a nice thing you did," a voice interrupted his thoughts from beside him. He didn't have to look to know who it was.

"I just told him the truth," Harry replied, still looking out into the Common Room.

"Yeah, and encouraged him and cheered him up. Five minutes ago he was miserable, and now he's laughing and having fun with his friends," the voice pointed out.

"He deserves to celebrate as much as anyone else here," Harry returned. "He had no reason to feel bad about the game. He shouldn't have been put in that position to begin with."

"No, he shouldn't have," the voice agreed, laying a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. "Nor should I have been put in as Seeker. You should have been out there."

Harry nodded absently. "Too late to change that now. All we can do now is make the best of what happened."

"You're right." There was a short pause. "I was thinking that your Firebolt would look really nice on the wall opposite the door in your office. You'd be able to see it from your desk, and people would see it as they walk in. And that wall is big enough that it wouldn't feel cramped at all. You could even still hang something else up there if you were so inclined."

"I might just do that," Harry said, turning towards her. "I think I trust your eye for style more than my own."

"And with good reason," Ginny teasingly replied.

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Harry cried out in mock indignation.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," she returned with a smirk as she took the fabric on the shoulder of his t-shirt in her fingers and examined it distastefully.

"I'll have you know that I had a lot of help picking out my clothes. The help of two attractive girls, mind you," Harry defended himself.

"Oh really?" she asked, her tone belying her interest in the subject. "Two attractive girls, you say?"

"That's right," Harry continued. "One attractive salesgirl at Madam Malkins helped me pick out all my robes. I also spent nearly an entire day shopping for a muggle wardrobe that actually fit, and an attractive sales girl helped me in that store as well."

"The smile on your face tells me you had a good time, so was it the shopping or the company that you enjoyed?" Ginny leered, teasing him mercilessly. The gleam in her eye was almost enough to give Harry pause.

“Oh it was definitely the company. Not only was she very cute, she was very nice as well. I couldn’t have asked for a better saleswoman,” Harry tried to reply in an offhanded manner.

“Sounds like she meant more to you than just some saleswoman,” Ginny countered.

“Never said she didn’t,” Harry returned, thoroughly enjoying the exchange. He could tell that Ginny was trying to tease him or embarrass him, but he wasn’t going to let her get to him. It’s not like he just had some crush on Jessica that went unfulfilled. Little did Ginny know that Harry actually took her on a date.

“So what was her name?” she asked casually.

“Jessica.”

“And you remember her name after all this time? Is Harry Potter pining after this girl?”

“I wouldn’t call it pining. But I would imagine any bloke would remember the name of a girl he took out on a date.” Harry looked up to catch her reaction to that statement. He wasn’t disappointed.

Ginny’s mouth dropped open as she looked at him with wide eyes. “A date?”

“Yup. She couldn’t resist my charm and gave me her number after she rang me up when we finally finished shopping. She told me to give her a call if I ever needed help shopping again, or even if I didn’t,” Harry told her. “Now I know I’m as thick as the next guy, but I’m not thick enough to entirely miss that statement. So I called her up, and we got dinner one night.”

“Wow,” she said softly. “That was unexpected.”

“What? You didn’t expect a girl to show interest in me?” Harry pouted.

“Of course I expect girls to be interested in you,” she fired back. She said this so matter-of-factly that Harry couldn’t help but feel his confidence swell. “It just caught me off guard to hear that you went on a date this summer is all. It’s not like you ever hinted at the fact.”

“Well I couldn’t say anything at the time because I was supposed to be stuck at the Dursleys. Nobody was supposed to figure out my little secret,” he said putting a little emphasis on the last part to let her know that he was talking specifically about her for figuring him out. But he also said it with a smile, so she would know that he didn’t regret the fact that she knew.

“Yes, well you should have known that I’d be entirely too clever for you,” she stated, as she breathed on her fingernails and polished them on her robes.

“How silly of me to ever doubt you,” Harry agreed.

“So tell me more about this Jessica gal. How did your date go?” Ginny prodded as she sat up and began to roll her shoulders.

“Your shoulder all right?” he asked her with some concern in his voice, when he noticed her rolling her shoulders.

“Just a little tight is all. They’ll be fine,” she replied as she continued to roll them. He watched as she arched her right arm up behind her head and attempted to rub her neck and shoulders as best she could.

Harry assumed that she was trying to loosen up her muscles; he continued to watch her for a long moment before speaking up. “I – um – I could, you know, rub them for you, if you’d like,” he offered tentatively.

She twisted her head toward him so fast that he was sure she’d have a crick in her neck later. “You don’t have to do that. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Oh,” Harry replied automatically. He was silent for another short moment before continuing. “I really don’t mind, but if you’d rather not, that’s fine. I just figured I’d offer since your shoulders seem to be bothering you.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she replied carefully, suddenly feeling as if the room was entirely too warm. “I don’t want to put you out though.”

“I’d hardly call that putting me out,” Harry said waving away the comment. “I mean, I wouldn’t even have to get up. And it’s not like I’m doing anything anyway. We can continue our conversation. I’ll even tell you all about my date, though there isn’t that much to tell.”

“Well how can I refuse an offer like that,” she replied somewhat uneasily.

She stretched for a moment and rolled her shoulders again, grimacing a little as she did so, before moving in front of the chair and lowering herself to the ground. “What are you doing all the way down there?” Harry asked her teasingly. “I promise I won’t bite,” he continued as he scooted back as far into the seat as he could and patted the cushion in front of him, his legs spread wide to offer her as much room as possible.

Ginny blushed at first but forced her embarrassment down and regained her composure as she said, “Not even if I ask nicely?”

Harry chuckled. “We’ll see. Now get up here.” Ginny complied and sat down right in front of Harry. She wasn’t pressed back all the way against him, but very close.

“Right,” Harry said absently as he studied her upper back. “Erm.” He put his hands tentatively on her shoulders and quickly realized that her hair was going to get in the way. He hesitated for a moment and then gently gathered her hair and moved it over her shoulder. He tried not to notice how silky it was. She glanced over her shoulder at him with a questioning look on her face.

“Your hair was in the way. Is that ok?” he asked indicating her hair.

Ginny just nodded. Their eyes met and held briefly before she turned back around. Harry concentrated his gaze on her shoulders. He had never given anybody a massage or back rub of any kind, and he was suddenly questioning the intelligence of his offer. "Erm, just let me know if I hurt you or what feels good and what doesn't. I've never really done this before."

Ginny turned her head back over her shoulder. "You don't have to do this if you don't feel comfortable."

"No, I want to help, I'm just worried that I might hurt you," he told her honestly.

"Don't worry. I'm sure you'll be fine, and I'll let you know how you're doing as you go."

He replaced his hands on her shoulders, one on either side of her head and began to gently rub. He was very tentative in his movements, and he was listening carefully for any indication that he was hurting her. Instead he got a command. "Harder, Harry. I can barely feel you."

"Oh, erm, sorry," Harry replied, putting a bit more force in his ministrations.

"It's alright, that's much better." Harry nodded, though she couldn't see it as she was facing away from him. After a long moment she spoke up again. "Weren't you going to tell me about your date?"

"Right, right," Harry replied nervously. "There's really not much to tell. We met at the store she works at and got dinner at an Italian restaurant. We talked a little. I obviously couldn't go into much detail about my life since she's a muggle. After dinner I walked her home."

"There has to be more to it than that," Ginny replied. "What did you talk about? Did you kiss her? Come on, details Harry."

“I told her as much as I could about my summer, how I was running and working out and also doing some studying. And I talked in generalities about how Snape hated me and Malfoy was a git. She gave me a short kiss after I walked her home. It wasn’t a big deal. She’s a nice girl, but nothing will come of it. But at least I can say I’ve been on at least one successful date”

“Mmm,” Ginny moaned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sure you know about me and Cho last year,” Harry said.

“I know that you went out for a bit and things didn’t turn out very well,” Ginny responded. “I don’t know much beyond that.”

“Well then, have I got a story for you,” Harry grumbled good-naturedly. “Where do I begin? I’m sure you know that I asked her to the ball in 4th year. She seemed like she would have liked to have gone with me, but she was already going with Cedric. I never got over her. Last year, she was still distraught over Cedric’s death. All she ever wanted to do was talk about him.”

“The whole thing was just a mistake waiting to happen,” Harry told her as he continued to rub her shoulders. “She was hung up on Cedric, and I’m sure you remember how I was last year. The first time she kissed me, shortly before Christmas, she burst out in tears. And there I was paralyzed at the fact that I had just kissed Cho Chang that I couldn’t even begin to try to comfort her, let alone figure out why she was crying.”

His story was interrupted as Ginny let out a guttural moan. “Oh, that feels good. Go on.”

Harry had almost forgotten what he was doing. He was so busy focusing on his story that he wasn’t paying any attention to what his hands were doing. But if that moan was anything to go by, his hands were doing quite fine on their own, so he left them to it. But he did try to pay a little more attention to what he was doing, focusing on trying to ease the tension out of her shoulders.

He continued after a moment. "Our one date was an absolute disaster. We went to Hogsmeade for Valentine's Day. We had absolutely nothing in common to talk about besides Quidditch, which we exhausted on the walk into town. She dragged me to Madam Puddifoot's, which is just about the most uncomfortable place I've ever been to. I was rather revolted. Just picture it: frill and lace to rival Umbridge's office and a horde of stupid cupids flying around sprinkling confetti on everything in sight, which were a forcible reminder of Lockhart. That's not even taking into account all the couples that were either holding hands or snogging."

Harry chuckled a bit at the memory, and then continued. "She got jealous when I said I had to meet Hermione later on and decided to tell me that Roger Davies had asked her out a couple weeks ago. Now mind you, he was at the table next to ours snogging the girl he was with. Then she brings up Cedric, which led to more tears. Before she finally blew up at me and told me to just go be with Hermione since that was what I really wanted anyway. She stormed out of there in tears, leaving me behind, sitting there completely stunned and thoroughly embarrassed."

"As smart as she is I can't believe she tried to 'test' you that early on," Ginny replied and then started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked a bit cautiously as he paused his hands.

"Oh, I'm just picturing the expression on your face," Ginny answered.

Harry laughed again as he started massaging her shoulders again. "It was definitely a unique experience, one I'm sure not to forget anytime soon."

"So you had a good time then?" Ginny asked him with a bit of humor in her voice.

Harry snorted. "No. I can't say that I did. Can you believe she actually wanted to start that up again?"

“Mmmm,” Ginny moaned noncommittally, apparently lost in the massage.

“She asked me to go to the ball with her, but luckily I had already asked you; otherwise, that would have been really awkward,” Harry told her.

“How’s that?” Ginny asked.

“It was easier to turn her down saying I already had another date. Turning her down saying I just don’t want to go with her would have been much more difficult, I really didn’t want to hurt her. I probably would have just said yes to spare her feelings,” Harry told her.

“Mmm, yeah, I can see you doing that,” Ginny commented before letting out another long groan as Harry’s fingers encountered a knot.

Harry couldn’t help but notice all the moans that Ginny was making; nor could he help the effect they had on his body. He imagined that he was probably enjoying the backrub as much as she. It wasn’t every day he got to run his hands around the body of a gorgeous woman, and Harry couldn’t deny that he certainly enjoyed doing it, though he’d never admit as much out loud. Couple that with the moans she was letting out, and Harry was a very happy boy at the moment. He was just glad that there was still a small margin of space between the two of them; otherwise she’d probably know just how happy he was as well.

He concentrated on his hands for a long moment as he continued to rub along her shoulders and upper back and neck. He concentrated on making her feel relaxed and loose as his fingers continued to work their magic. If he was paying more attention to his actual hands, he might have noticed the soft blue glow at the tips of his fingers. After a minute he asked her, “So how did you and Michael Corner hook up last year anyway?”

Silence met his query. He kept on rubbing her shoulders for a long moment, and then asked, “Ginny?” Still nothing. After another

moment he stopped rubbing her shoulders and leaned forward around her shoulder. "You alright, Gin?"

"Don' stop," she murmured drowsily.

"Yes ma'am," Harry chuckled lightly. He didn't really want to stop anyway. "So, are you going to tell me how you and Corner started going out or not?"

"Later," was her muffled reply.

"You're quite the talkative one tonight, Gin," he teased her playfully.

"Can't concentrate," she said after a moment.

"Why's that?" he asked her curiously.

"Feels too good," she said simply with another soft moan.

"Oh," Harry said with surprise. "Guess that means I'm doing alright then, huh?"

"Mmm."

"I'll take that as a yes then," Harry laughed. He focused on his hands again as he rubbed along the top of her shoulders. His fingertips dug into the top of her shoulders as his thumbs pressed into her upper back. He kneaded her muscles with his fingers with some force willing the tenseness away. After another few minutes, she slumped back against his chest, and his hands left her.

She stayed that way for a long moment and almost of their own volition his arms wrapped themselves around her. She wrapped her arms around his and tilted her head back to look him in the eye and asked him, "I ever tell you how much I love you?" As if that was the most common question in the world.

Harry, on the other hand, was completely taken aback. Love? Why would she say something like that? He was sure she was just playing around, but it still struck him hard. He had never had anyone tell him that they loved him before. She may not have been entirely serious in what she was saying, but Harry couldn't help the feeling of warmth that invaded him. "Err, no?"

"You keep rubbing my back like that, and I'll be sure to make a habit of it," she replied dreamily.

Harry couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped him. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

"You do that. Do I need to ask where you learned to do that?" She teased.

"No need to; I didn't learn anywhere. That was the first time I've tried that. I don't think I'd be comfortable doing that for just anyone."

"But you're comfortable with me?" she asked him, brown eyes searching his face.

"Of course," he replied easily. "You're my best friend. How could I not be?" Apparently that had been the right thing to say, for she squeezed his arms in a roundabout hug.

"You really are one of the sweetest guys I've ever met, did you know that?"

Harry blushed at her praise, and her comment struck a memory. "That's what Jessica told me, more or less anyway. She told me that I was very sweet. Apparently that's a good quality in a guy since she seemed to like me," he reflected aloud.

"Of course it is," Ginny agreed. Harry's stomach growled suddenly. "I'm getting hungry, and apparently you are too. Why don't we go grab something to eat before all the food disappears?"

Harry readily agreed as they both got up. The two of them set off to retrieve some refreshments. The party went on for hours. No one seemed to mind the chance to take a break from studying to just sit around and laugh and talk for hours on end.

Harry and Ginny stayed together for the rest of the party. Harry could only laugh when she said that it helped to keep the crowd of boys away. He knew all too well what it was like to be thrust into the spotlight when you really want nothing more than to blend in. They talked with a variety of people throughout the afternoon and into the evening, just mingling through the crowds. They each retold the story of their catch on several different occasions. Harry's version of his own catch was downplayed.

At one point Ginny went to talk to several of her girl friends, and Harry got dragged along with her. Harry was shocked to see a side of Ginny he had never seen before. He had always lumped her into a category of girls along with Hermione who never seemed to get well, girly. That's not to say he didn't know she was a girl, but he hadn't noticed her getting all giggly, or obsessive over makeup, the latest fashions and hair charms, or the best gossip.

The girls talked about a variety of things as Harry just listened in awe from the sidelines. They talked about the latest trends in dress and formal robes, apparently Madame Malkins had just gotten some in before the beginning of term and they were a bit controversial in design.

Melissa Thorner, one of Ginny's roommates, got really excited about them. "I had to beg and plead with my mum to let me choose one of those designs for my dress robes. She is so old fashioned; she is just bound and determined that no one will ever see my cleavage. It took awhile to convince her, but I finally pulled it off. I mean that style is just so perfect for my figure. The shape of the neckline totally shows off my..." she trailed off with a glance in Harry's direction.

Claire Hansen, another of Ginny's roommates, jumped right in, she didn't seem to notice Harry's presence at all, "I can't stand that new design, it looks absolutely horrid on me, with my lack of anything up top, well, lets just say it looks like I'm playing dress up in my mum's

robes, cause there is no way in heaven or hell that I have any chance of filling them out. I was so embarrassed at Gladrags a few weeks ago when the attendant tried to help me stuff...”

At that point Harry tried to stop paying much attention to what the girls were saying, because they were sharing way too much information. He was pretty sure that his face had to look like it was on fire he was so embarrassed. He was amazed at some of what they were saying. He had a hard time believing that these girls were willing to talk about such personal information, especially so openly. One of the most shocking things, to him at least, was some of the things that Ginny said about herself. It was all he could do not to interrupt her and set her straight. He probably would have if he didn't want to remind them that he was there, as that would have significantly added to his embarrassment.

Eventually the talk turned to the hair and makeup styles that they each hoped to use for the upcoming ball. That turned the topic into a free for all. On what, Harry wasn't exactly sure. He knew it had something to do with makeup color charms, but they at times seemed to be talking about hair color charms, so he wasn't sure. He pretty much totally tuned it out at that point. He had no earthly idea how to follow let alone participate in any conversation that was at least a third giggles. Translating giggles was well beyond his capabilities.

As he stood there he kept couldn't help but compare this discussion to any of the conversation that he and his four roommates got into. That was when Harry decided that he would never really understand girls, especially Ginny. In all the time they'd spent together Ginny had never even hinted that she was like this, not that there was anything wrong with it, it was just a bit disconcerting. He could talk to her about anything he talked to his other friends about, and in all actuality he could talk to her about more than he could talk to his other friends about. All in all, Harry found this new side of Ginny to be quite intriguing to say the least.

A near shout from behind him nearly caused him to hex Romilda Vane, a forth year, as she approached their little group. “You guys are so not going to believe what I just heard.”

Ginny, Claire, and Melissa all stopped and turned to face her, their eyes lit up with a sort of unholy glee. "What did you hear? Come on girl, spill," Melissa nearly commanded.

Romilda paused with a 'I know something you don't know' look on her face, her hands were clasped in front of her like she was trying to physically hold onto her news, and she was rocking back and forth on her heels. She looked at each of the other girls, apparently savoring their looks of anticipation.

Finally she said in a loud stage whisper, "Well, I just heard Parvarti and Lavender having a bit of a tiff. Apparently Parvarti heard from Padma who heard from her roommate, whose name I couldn't understand, that Seamus and Lavender were caught in an empty classroom and rumor has it," here she obviously paused for effect, "that clothing was optional!"

All of the girls gasped, looking scandalized to varying degrees. "So, why were Parvarti and Lavender arguing then?" Claire asked.

As one the girls leaned in to hear Romilda's answer. "From what I could tell Parvarti was upset because Lavender hadn't told her. I heard her say that the last that she knew Lavender had a thing for Ron because..."

Ginny broke in at that point, "Please don't say anything else about Ron. I don't want to know what is being said about my brother. There are just some things a sister should never know."

"Well," Romilda continued, "it seems as though Padma's roommate had it all wrong because Lavender hasn't done anything with Seamus. He had pulled her into the classroom to ask her to the ball. But I did hear her mention that she wouldn't mind checking out a few things about that boy." She finished with a suggestive waggle of her eyebrows, "You know what I mean..."

Claire and Melissa both looked as confused as Harry was feeling.

Ginny came to their rescue with a very mischievous expression on her face, "Come on you two, you know all the girls are absolutely

barmy over his accent and then when you throw in the size of his feet..." She trailed off shooting Harry a sly smirk. "You all know what that means."

All the girls burst out into a renewed fit of giggles. Harry hadn't thought he could be more embarrassed than he'd been at the beginning of this whole experience, but he'd been wrong, dead wrong. He felt his face heat up to nearly unprecedented levels as the full meaning of her statement registered. He turned startled eyes to Ginny to find her watching him, amusement clearly shining in her eyes. She had done that on purpose. Well two could play that game. "And it's true, too" he said finally joining the banter.

The giggles came to a complete and utter stop, the silence was nearly deafening, and all their eyes flew to his face. "What?" several voices shrieked.

"About feet," Harry returned simply, trying his level best to keep a straight face. He looked at Ginny; whose mouth was agape, then gave her a wink and returned her mischievous smile. The other girls had started giggling again. He couldn't help but notice that several of them glanced down at his feet. He did his best to fight off the blush that wanted to creep back up his face.

"You did that on purpose," a voice whispered in his ear.

"And you're one to talk?" Harry retorted.

"Do you have any idea what you've just started? That's all they're going to be talking about now," Ginny told him.

Harry shrugged. "So? I imagine it will make for interesting conversation." He was grinning widely.

"Oh, I don't doubt that. So what size shoe do you wear?" she asked him just loud enough that the rest of the girls heard her. They all stopped what they were doing and focused their attention solely on him, waiting anxiously for his answer.

“That’s none of your business, pervert,” Harry teased.

“Oh come on, Harry. Tell us,” one of the girls pleaded. Harry didn’t see who it was; he was too busy watching Ginny’s reactions. They kept pestering him, and he eventually expanded his focus to include all of the girls.

“Oh no,” Harry stated, waving his arms in front of himself. “I’m not telling anything. By breakfast tomorrow morning the entire school would know.”

“What’s the big deal, Harry? Are you afraid? Do you have small feet or something?” Ginny asked him. There was no mistaking how much she was enjoying this.

“I’m not falling for it,” Harry calmly retorted. “Anything I say will be twisted around horribly anyway.”

“You’re no fun,” Romilda pouted. The rest of the girls echoed the sentiment.

“I just have too much experience to fall for your tricks. After you’ve dealt with Rita Skeeter, everyone else is an amateur,” Harry informed the group. “Besides, I was just teasing you all with the feet thing. I have no idea whether or not it’s true. I’ve never exactly tried to verify it.”

“So you’re saying you’ve never taken a peek?” Ginny asked him.

“You have to have seen something in the dorm, or in the bathroom,” Melissa questioned a bit desperately.

“Sorry,” Harry told them, not totally believing he was having this conversation. “I do my best to avoid noticing these things.”

The girls went back to their gossiping after that, and Harry returned to his observer status. A few minutes later, the conversation had tapered off, and Ginny was ready to move on. Harry was only too

happy to oblige. On the way to check on the butterbeer supply, Hermione, who was dragging Ron by the arm, intercepted them.

Hermione glared pointedly at Ron as she turned to Harry. "Ron has something he wants to tell you," she informed him.

Ron nodded his head but was silent for a long moment. Eventually he sucked in a big breath and turned toward Harry. "I just wanted to say thanks for saving Ginny," he said somewhat uneasily, unable to meet Harry's eye.

"You have nothing to thank me for. I didn't save her for you," Harry replied his voice as cold as ice.

"Erm, right, well I'm just glad you were there," Ron continued apprehensively.

"Right. Is that all you had to say then?" Harry asked him impatiently. He could have helped his friend, but he really didn't want to. It was obvious Ron was uncomfortable talking to Harry, and it was probably because he was starting to feel bad about booting him off the team. But Harry wasn't going to just let it go without an apology, not this time. He let Ron off the hook rather easily in his fourth year, and Ron didn't appear to learn his lesson very well. Maybe if he was forced to actually fess up to his stupidity, he would work to rein it in, in the future.

"Er..." he started uneasily. "Yes –What the bloody he..." Ron looked down at Hermione while he hopped on one foot and clutched his toes in his hand. Seeing the look on her face he continued, "I mean, no, that's not all." Apparently she wasn't going to let Ron chicken out.

"Well?" Harry prodded impatiently.

"Well you see... erm, well I just wanted to say that I'm – erm – I'm sorry for kicking you off the team," Ron finally blurted out in an incoherent stream of noise, thoroughly examining his trainers.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t catch that last part. You were mumbling,” Harry told him. Sure he knew what his friend had said, but that’s only because he knew what Ron was going to say before he said it. If he hadn’t known beforehand, there was no way he’d be able to decipher his garbled speech.

“I said that I’m sorry for kicking you off the team,” Ron stated much more slowly and clearly, tilting his head up and focusing past Harry’s shoulder.

The fact that Ron had to be forcibly dragged and coerced into his apology combined with the fact that he couldn’t even look Harry in the eye did nothing to dampen Harry’s anger one bit. “Right. Come on, we need to talk, and I’d rather not do this in public,” Harry said, leading Ron and the girls to the same secluded corner of the Common Room where he had cheered Nate up and given Ginny her back rub. He drew his wand with a flick of his wrist and made sure to perform the proper wand movements as he set up a simple privacy ward.

OoOoO

Ron watched silently as Harry paced back and forth in front of him. Suddenly, his friend stopped and turned towards him. The intense look on Harry’s face caused Ron to gulp. Audibly.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me?” Harry asked him icily.

“I kicked you off the team,” Ron responded as if Harry were a small child. Apparently that hadn’t been the smartest thing to say if the look on Harry’s face was anything to go by.

“If you think that’s all you’ve done to jeopardize our friendship, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Ron gaped at him, he couldn’t think of anything else that he had done that could’ve hurt their friendship. “Wha -- what do you mean?”

“Where do I start?” Harry retorted. “Let’s see, I guess it began back in the summer with you trying to stop Ginny from writing to me. I don’t remember ever giving you the right to decide who could and could not write to me. And if that wasn’t enough, you snuck into Ginny’s room to read the letter I had written to her. If I had wanted you to read it, I would have put your name at the top. That’s an invasion of both her privacy and mine.” Harry paused. Ron made a move to defend himself, but Harry held up a hand to stop him. “This will be a whole lot easier if you just let me get through this.”

Ron’s mouth clamped shut as he stared at his best friend wondering where all this was coming from. Was he really still on about that? Couldn’t Harry understand that he was just worried about him at the time?

After a moment, Harry continued. “Ever since the HA started, you’ve done nothing but challenge my authority. If there’s one person you reminded me of, it was Draco Malfoy. He expects to be given special treatment because he’s a Malfoy. You walked into my class expecting that same special treatment. After all the times we’ve complained about him and the rest of the Slytherins getting special treatment in Snape’s classes, you expected me to do the same for you. Personally, I don’t like being cast in the same lot with Snape.”

Harry began pacing again as he continued. “But that’s not the only thing you did. Oh no, like a true Malfoy, you decided to attack another student who had done absolutely nothing to deserve it because he was different than you. And you didn’t even have the decency do it to his face. You tried to get in a cheap shot like a true Malfoy. And to top it all off, you got mad at me for stopping you. You got mad and stopped talking to me for not acting like Snape or any of the other Slytherins that we can’t stand.”

Ron felt that one like a slap in the face. When Harry first compared him to Malfoy, he wanted to rage out at him. How could his “best friend” compare him to the likes of Draco Malfoy? It was just about the worst insult that could have been thrown at him. But then Harry went on to explain how he had acted just like Malfoy, and try as he might, Ron couldn’t think of a good way to defend himself. He couldn’t believe it. Had he really acted like that? The thought that he

could even be lightly compared to Malfoy was enough to make him want to retch.

“And did you ever even stop to think how I felt?” Ron chewed the inside of his cheek to stop himself from answering. He had never stopped to think about how Harry was feeling in regards to his actions, but he had thought a lot about what Harry was thinking siding with the Slytherins. At the time he couldn’t believe that Harry would choose those snakes over his best friend, but now that he heard things from Harry’s perspective, he had a much harder time justifying his own actions.

“No,” Harry continued. “Do you think I enjoyed yelling at you? Docking points from my own house? Do you even realize the incredibly difficult spot you put me in? The success of those classes depends on how willing everyone is to listen and follow my directions. They won’t do that if they don’t respect me. From day one you’ve done nothing but make my job a hundred times harder. After all, if I can’t even get one of my best friends to cooperate and follow my instructions, why should anybody else listen? I’m just lucky so many of them were in the DA last year and already trusted me. Had you pulled stunts like that in a class full of new students, I don’t know if I would have been able to recover or get anything accomplished.”

Ron watched as Harry stopped pacing and took several deep breaths. His voice had been starting to rise in his last rant, and Ron was worried about what was coming next. He had never meant to cause trouble in Harry’s classes. He just couldn’t understand why Harry trusted the Slytherins. But now that he thought about it, he knew it didn’t excuse his actions. He had originally apologized for kicking Harry off the Quidditch team hoping Harry would forgive him and things would be normal by the end of the night. The more Harry talked, the more worried Ron grew and the more he realized just how badly he had screwed things up.

“Your lack of respect for your sister reached an all time high when you decided to raid my trunk, disregarding my privacy, looking to borrow one of the few things I have of my father without my permission. Which is also called stealing. Had there been an

emergency, I probably would have been able to let it slide. Trying to catch your sister snogging does not qualify. Then, when confronted about it, you didn't even have the decency to apologize."

When Harry stopped and looked him directly in the eyes, Ron immediately looked away. "But that's not the worst thing you did that night in my opinion."

Ron chanced a glance back up at his friend. Harry was standing rigidly with a fire in his eyes that Ron would not soon forget. He noticed Ginny walk about behind Harry and squeeze his shoulder. He couldn't help the pang of regret that the sight invoked. That used to be his position. After only a moment Ron returned his gaze to the ground. He couldn't bear to look at Harry.

"Instead of apologizing for invading my privacy with the intent to steal from me, if only temporarily, you get mad at me and tell me I couldn't possibly understand since I don't have a family. Now you'll have to excuse me, but I used to think that I had a brother and a sister. I guess I was wrong on at least one of those counts."

"Only one," Hermione put in warmly, knowing exactly who Harry was talking about.

Ron felt like a lead weight had just been dropped into his stomach. He had always considered Harry as good as a brother, more than a brother, in fact. But he had real brothers of his own, a real family of his own, and he had never made the connection that Harry really saw him as a brother, literally. That he was Harry's family. And from the sound of it, he had ruined that.

He didn't have time to think any further on that, for Harry started up again. "And now that brings us back to the reason we're having this conversation. You kicked me off the team knowing full well how much Quidditch means to me. You know how much it hurt last year to have to sit on the sidelines while you and the rest of the team were out there on the pitch. I hated Umbridge for taking Quidditch away from me. But at least I knew where I stood with her. We were enemies. She hated me and I her. What's your excuse?" Ron flinched when he

heard that, each accusation of Harry's stinging much worse than the hexes used in HA.

"You are supposed to be my friend. How could you just take away something I love like that? But this goes beyond just that. I don't think it's any shock to you that we've been drifting apart recently. Quidditch was one of the few things that we still shared where things between us seemed normal, like they used to be. I felt like I had my best friend back during those times. And don't even try to tell me you didn't feel the same way. How do you think it felt for you to just throw that away? To throw me away?" Harry stopped talking and held both hands up to his face, pressing his fingers against both of his temples. The pain in Harry's expression nearly drove Ron to his knees. He couldn't believe that his plan to spend more time with Harry had gone this wrong.

For the first time in his life, Ron truly began to think about the consequences of his actions. He had never before really considered how his actions affected others. In all his fighting with Harry, he had never once considered how Harry might be feeling. He never considered that he could actually hurt Harry.

"Answer me this," after a moment Harry lifted his head and looked him right in the eye. "Why apologize now? Did you just now realize that you made a mistake?"

Ron shook his head sadly. Maintaining eye contact with Harry was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He didn't want to continue this conversation because he knew that he was about to hurt his best friend even more.

"Alright, then when did you figure it out?" Harry asked.

Ron did not want to answer that question, but he knew that he had to. He was seriously tempted to lie but knew he had already done enough damage. "About a week or so ago."

"Then I ask again: why now?"

“I don’t know,” Ron cried in frustration; he didn’t know how to do this. “I just thought if we could win without you, everyone would be happy, and I could just apologize then, and we could just forget it ever happened and celebrate.”

Harry laughed, but Ron could tell it held no humor. “Did you ever think that I might have appreciated you apologizing earlier and giving me the chance to actually play in the game?”

Ron couldn’t answer that question; though he knew the answer, he just couldn’t bring himself to say it. “Or is there more to it than that?” Harry mused aloud. “Why didn’t you apologize to me before the game?” Harry asked him again.

Ron stared at his shoes and remained silent. “You wanted to prove you could do it without me, didn’t you?” Ron’s head snapped up painfully, the look of betrayal on Harry’s face was one he was sure he would never forget. Then Harry continued, “You wanted to prove that you didn’t need the great Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived to win, didn’t you? You wanted to show everyone that you could lead the team to victory without me.”

Chapter 12:I Solemnly Swear That We Are Up To Some Serious Pranking

Ron stared at his shoes and remained silent. Realization dawned on Harry. "You wanted to prove you could do it without me, didn't you?" Ron's head snapped up painfully. "You wanted to prove that you didn't need the great Harry Potter, Boy-Who-Lived to win, didn't you? You wanted to show everyone that you could lead the team to victory without me."

Both girls gasped, and turned horrified eyes to Ron, hoping to find his innocence staring back at them. They were disappointed.

Ron's silence convinced Harry of his guilt. Up until a few moments ago he never would have even suspected that Ron could stoop this low; even now he was having a hard time believing it. "Why?" he asked. "Why...just why?" The hurt in his voice was evident.

"I'm sorry," Ron cried out. "I just...you're one of the best seekers I've ever seen play. And you've been getting even better. Anybody could win with you around because chances are you'll catch the snitch long before the other team has a chance to score 150 points."

"And was it worth it?" Harry asked, feeling more betrayed by the second.

"No," Ron immediately replied, his head down.

"Why not?" Harry inquired, not really sure if wanted the answer to that question.

Ron paused for a moment before responding. "A couple reasons. I didn't stop to think about how it would affect you. And I'm sorry for that. And also, I had little to nothing to do with our win. Without Ginny, we would've lost anyway. It's my fault we were in that position. If Ginny was in at chaser, we would have been in much better shape."

Harry nodded. He felt that was an accurate representation of the situation. "So this brings us back to the present. You apologized

thinking everything would be back to normal by tonight. You never really gave a thought to how kicking me off the team would affect me. And I can't just forgive and forget that. But I am sick of arguing with you. And I'm sick of the strain it's putting on all our friends. They've been forced to pick sides and deal with the tension between us all term, and I hate having to see that."

Harry paused a moment. "A friendship has to work both ways, and there has to be trust there. And frankly, I don't see how I can trust you right now." Harry trailed off here. He had lost all his steam, and had nothing left to say.

There was a long period of uncomfortable silence as each boy contemplated everything that was said and the ramifications thereof. After a couple long minutes, Ron took a deep breath and looked at Harry. "So what does that mean? Where does that leave us?"

Harry ran a weary hand through his hair. Where did that leave them? He couldn't trust Ron; that much was clear. And wasn't friendship built on trust? But he didn't want to just forget the last five years of friendship he had shared with him. Why did everything always have to be so complicated? He wished they could just put everything behind them and forget any of this happened, but he knew that wasn't a possibility.

They couldn't go back, so that only left moving forward. But the question of where they were and where they were going was still unanswered. And Harry didn't even know how to begin to answer. "I don't know, Ron. All I know is I don't want to fight with you any more. We'll obviously still be seeing a lot of each other, and I don't want to be at odds with you or for things to be tense or awkward."

Ron nodded but didn't speak. Harry sighed. He opened his mouth but then shut it again, unsure of what else to say. He felt Ginny's hands squeeze his upper arms in comfort and turned to give her a grateful smile.

Shortly after the tentative truce was formed between Ron and Harry, Ginny tugged on Harry's sleeve and asked, "Do you want to get out of here for a bit?"

“Yes,” Harry immediately agreed. “I’m really not in the mood to celebrate right now.”

“I hear you,” Ginny agreed. She led him by the arm to the portrait hole. He pushed the door open and waved her through before following after.

“So where to?” he asked her as soon as the portrait shut, drowning out most of the noise from the party.

Ginny thought about it for a moment. “Well, you said the house elves provided us with all that food. We could drop by the kitchen to say thanks,” she suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” Harry said. “I think they’d appreciate that, though I’m sure they won’t expect it.”

Ginny laughed. “I think you’re right about that.”

The two walked down the corridors in companionable silence as they made their way to the kitchens. Harry tickled the pear and again allowed Ginny into the entryway before him. Of course, even the human shield in front of him wasn’t a deterrent for an excitable Dobby, who nearly bowled Harry over as he latched onto Harry’s knees.

“Harry Potter sir has come to visit Dobby!” the elf squeaked excitedly. A thought seemed to strike him, for his demeanor changed in an instant. “Is there a problem with Harry Potter sir’s party? Oh, bad Dobby. Did we’s not makes enough foods for Harry Potter sir’s friends?” Dobby questioned worriedly.

“No, no, it’s nothing like that,” Harry hastily assured him. “We actually stopped by to say thank you. We really appreciate you and the rest of the elves preparing all that food for us.”

“You and your Miss Wheezy wants to thank Dobby?” the elf asked wondrously.

“Yes, Dobby,” Ginny answered softly. “We want to thank you and all the elves. You really outdid yourselves. The food was great.”

“Harry Potter sir is truly the greatest wizard in the world,” Dobby exclaimed. “And his Miss Wheezy is the greatest witch.”

The two teens chuckled. “Thank you, Dobby. You know, you’re always good for an ego boost,” Harry joked. Ginny laughed out loud.

Dobby didn’t seem to get the joke, but he was happy all the same. Harry and Ginny left soon after that. Once they were out in the hall, he turned to her and asked, “So where to now?”

“I don’t know,” Ginny mused aloud. “I really don’t want to head back to the Common Room.”

“Me neither,” Harry inserted; he paused for a moment and then offered, “We could hang out in my office, if you’d like.”

“That sounds great,” Ginny agreed with a smile.

A short walk later and they had arrived. Ginny immediately plopped down on one side of the sofa. She was surprised, though pleased, when Harry sank into the cushion next to her rather than taking one of the unoccupied armchairs. Of course, being a guy, Harry had to spread his legs wide open, leaving his left leg brushing against her right. He also had his arm along the sofa behind her. She made no move to pull away, however. They were barely touching, and she found she liked the physical contact. After the hectic day she had had, it helped settle her. She wondered if Harry could possibly feel the same way.

As she settled into the sofa, Ginny’s mind drifted over everything that had happened in that day. And what a day it was! As the door closed behind her, Ginny listlessly wandered back toward Gryffindor Tower. What a day! So much had happened in such a short amount of time, she had trouble just processing it all, let alone making sense of any of it. It all started off with the Quidditch match.

She snuggled closer to the warm body beside her as her thoughts drifted to the events at the end of the match. Ginny had really begun to worry that she wouldn't catch the snitch in time. The game had been quickly spiraling out of their control. The team needed her to catch it; she needed to catch it for Harry. When she finally did catch it, she was ecstatic. She had raised her arms in triumph, shouting in happiness. She'd only been hanging onto her broom with her legs when something ploughed into her from behind. She shivered as she remembered the pain of the hit and how scared she'd been as she fell to the earth; her screams of fear during her fall still echoed in her mind..

Harry must have felt her shiver because he dropped his arm from behind her and gave her shoulder a slight squeeze. When she turned to look at him, he offered her a small smile. This stopped her train of thought, but only for a moment. Soon enough her mind wondered back to her fall.

When Harry's spell hit her, Ginny's screams of fear had faded as she'd realized she was no longer falling. She remembered opening her eyes shocked to find that she was moving towards the stands. As she'd approached the stands she'd realized that everyone else was as surprised as she was. Everyone but one person, she amended herself, as Harry, wand outstretched, was rushing out to meet her.

Words couldn't even begin to describe the feelings this sight invoked in her. When she finally reached the stands, she had thrown her arms around Harry and held on for dear life. She didn't ever want to let go. She was alive. She was safe. She was with Harry. He had held on just as tightly for a little while. He made sure she was all right and then worked on cheering her up, congratulating her on the catch. But he let her hold onto him for as long as she needed.

The real test, though she hadn't meant for it to be, came when she realized that his broom had probably not fared as well from the fall as she. When she'd brought it up, he refused to even spare it a second thought. All he cared about in that moment was her, and Ginny couldn't help but smile and feel bolstered at the thought.

She sighed as she remembered the brief respite she'd received in the changing rooms after that. Her teammates had shared their congratulations and worries and had a couple questions right away, but that died down relatively quickly giving her a moment of peace. The moment did not last long as she was swept away with the rest of the team back up to Gryffindor Tower where their entire house had descended upon them, clapping, cheering, giving congratulations, and asking a hundred questions.

At that moment there was only one person she wanted to see, and he was the one person who didn't seem to be vying for her attention. Try as she might to find him, she couldn't get away from the crowd of students around her. She did eventually find him, allowing her to thank him for what he'd done.

A little later on, one of the odder things in a day full of oddities occurred. Harry gave her a backrub. Almost equally interesting was the conversation going on during the backrub. Harry had been talking about his two dates: The Disaster, as he called it, with Cho, and the nice one with Jessica. The latter would require some further thought. He assured her that there was only friendship there, but Ginny was not entirely convinced.

But that wasn't important to her just now. What intrigued her was that backrub. She was more than a little amazed that he'd offered. And then before she'd known it she'd found herself in what could be considered a fairly intimate position, sitting before him, nestled between his legs, and receiving a backrub from him.

She had never before received a backrub like that. Sure her mum had rubbed her back at times while comforting her or when she wasn't feeling well, but that was entirely different. She was incredibly nervous at first, not knowing what to expect. There were very few guys she was comfortable enough with to allow them to touch her like that, and Harry was the only one whose last name wasn't Weasley.

That backrub had stirred up more emotions than she was comfortable with. Whether she liked it or not, there was history there, in her case anyway. For a long time she'd fancied herself in love with the boy. But she was well past that, and Harry was her best friend.. She

trusted Harry more than she trusted anyone else. There really wasn't any reason for her to be uncomfortable, so she'd swallowed her discomfort and let herself calm down.

Once he'd gotten the hang of it, he'd turned out to be really good. She really had been interested in the story of his two dates, but as his hands had continued to knead the muscles on her back and shoulders, she'd found herself having difficulties following his words. At first it had just been her muscles relaxing. His hands had felt so good; she'd felt all her worries and troubles fading away.

But then it had gone beyond that. She'd stopped worrying so much about her fall or about any of the chaos of the day. She was with Harry now, and she'd never felt so safe. Ever since her experience with the Diary her first year, she had lost a lot of faith in people's abilities to protect her. She learned that her mum and dad couldn't always protect her. She learned that even someone as powerful as Dumbledore couldn't always protect her.

While Harry hadn't been able to stop her from succumbing to the effects of the Diary, that hadn't stopped him from rushing to her rescue and battling a giant basilisk to save her. When Death Eaters had attacked in Diagon Alley over the summer, it wasn't Bill or her mum that managed to save her, but Harry. At the Quidditch match, there were hundreds of other people who could have saved her, but it was Harry who had done it. It was Harry who had stopped her descent and brought her to safety. Not the mighty Albus Dumbledore or any of the other professors. It was always Harry. He was the only one who made her feel safe.

She had become so relaxed during the massage that she hadn't really been conscious of what she was saying. It wasn't until she saw a look of surprise cross Harry's face that her words caught up to her. She had told him that she loved him. She was surprised at herself, but not upset. She knew it was true. She did love Harry. She wasn't sure how much or the exact nature of her feelings, but she could say without a doubt in her mind that she loved him.

At that thought she glanced over at her silent companion, he'd had a rough couple of weeks, and today hadn't been a picnic for him either.

She reached up across her body and grabbed his hand in hers to pull his arm down around her shoulders. She tucked their clasped hands close to her body and thought back to the trauma of their day.

Ron's admission about his motives for keeping Harry off the team was certainly traumatic enough, though that whole confrontation had been pretty horrible. It started with Ron, the dense inconsiderate prat that he was, having to be practically forced by Hermione to apologize to Harry. Harry's reaction to the apology and his subsequent monologue had surprised even her, and she had spoken to Harry about all the things he'd brought up, several times in fact. But frankly, she rather thought the git deserved everything he'd got and worse. She still couldn't believe that Ron had kept Harry off the team just so he could prove that he could win without him.

She sighed inwardly. It had been a very long day, but it was nice to be able to just sit there with Harry without anything to do or worry about. They weren't talking, but just being there with him was exactly what she needed after her day.

The next day at lunch, Harry was sitting with Ginny and her friends. They were teasing him about his shoe size again when they noticed Luna drifting by at the same time Neville wandered over to the table, so they invited both to sit with them encouraged each to invite their dates for the ball so that they could all discuss the seating arrangements.

Soon the six of them were all sitting together at Gryffindor's table eating lunch and talking. Harry recognized Luna's date from his BHA classes, Alex Smith, a Hufflepuff fifth year. If he remembered correctly, Alex was especially good with shield charms. After all agreed that they would sit together, Ginny asked the group, "So does anyone have another couple in mind that they want to sit with us?"

Hannah chimed in affirmatively. She wanted to invite Ernie MacMillan and his date. Alex immediately seconded the request, explaining that Ernie was his cousin. Harry found Ernie to be a bit pompous at times, but he was a pretty decent bloke. "That's fine by me," he declared, looking around at Luna, Neville, and Ginny to make sure they all agreed.

“All right, so that leaves us with eight seats occupied then. Does anybody know how many seats there are per table?” Ginny asked as Harry moved to take a bite of his sandwich. Harry had barely gotten a bite in when he was interrupted.

“Harry James Potter!” Hermione scolded. “What are you lot on about?”

Harry looked over at her in confusion and a bit of frustration. What was she harping about now? Couldn’t she just let him eat in peace? He swallowed his bite and asked, “What’s that?”

“Don’t play coy with me,” Hermione admonished. “Why aren’t Ron and I being included in your seating arrangements for the ball?”

” Yeah!” Ron exclaimed from beside her. “What’s the big idea?”

Hermione turned and gave him a look that quite distinctly said, “You’re not helping.” She then turned back to Harry and asked, “So why haven’t you saved seats for us at the table?”

Harry glanced at the rest of his friends, noticing how incredibly uncomfortable they all looked, except for Luna whose demeanor was as dreamy as ever. Hannah and Alex, who didn’t know them all very well, looked especially nervous and uneasy with the conversation. Harry wished Hermione had shown a little more tact than to bring this up in front of everyone. “I wasn’t aware that I was supposed to,” Harry replied calmly, though his body was tensed up in irritation.

“We’re your best friends,” she replied as if stating a fact. “Why wouldn’t you want to sit with us?”

“Oh you are, are you?” Harry retorted hotly, though careful to keep his voice under control so as not to attract unwanted attention.

Hermione nodded pointedly. “You even said it yourself we were the closest you have to a family.”

“The last time I checked, not all brothers and sisters turn out to be best friends. It just so happens that my best friend is sitting on the bench beside me.” Harry retorted, his face softening for a brief moment as he gave Ginny a cursory glance. “Some siblings don’t even get along with each other at times. Why don’t you go ask Ron how he feels about Percy and let me get back to my lunch?”

“But Percy turned his back on his family,” Hermione input. Harry just stared pointedly at her. “We have not turned our backs on you!” she declared shrilly.

“Oh no?” Harry asked. “I could have sworn my “best friend and brother” there recently kicked me off the Quidditch team for no good reason, and....”

“ Just because you’re upset with Ron right now,” Hermione interrupted, “doesn’t mean you should....”

“Ron is not the only person I’m upset with, thank you very much,” Harry butted in. “You seem to think you’re innocent in all of this. You’re not. You knew Ron was wrong for what he did, but you stuck by him regardless, comforting him. It’s good to know I can always count on you to stick up for me, sis. And that’s not even the half of it. You have absolutely no trust in me. For the past several months you’ve been on a bloody crusade to save me from depression. News flash, Hermione: I’m not depressed. But will you listen to me when I tell you I’m fine? No, of course not, because you don’t trust me to be able to take care of myself. I think I’ll stick to my friends who actually show me a modicum of respect. Now would you please let me eat my lunch in peace? I have a class that I need to prepare for, and I’d rather not have to teach on an empty stomach.”

Harry turned away from Hermione and began eating his sandwich again. After a moment of silence Hannah put in, “There are still two seats open at the table. I heard Professor McGonagall say there were ten per table. You and Ron can have them, if you’d like.”

“Thank you Hannah,” Hermione replied with as much dignity as she could muster. She and Ron then sat further down the table to eat

their lunches. Ginny tried her best to lighten up the mood and start a conversation after they left, but with only minimal success. The rest of the meal was spent mostly in uncomfortable silence.

Harry and Ginny met later that night for her training. They normally met on Saturdays, but with the Quidditch match and the party afterwards, in addition to all the drama, they never got around to it the day before. The first thing they did after arriving in his office was hang his Firebolt up on the wall. Harry cast a reparo charm to fix the crack in it so that it would look as good as new. Afterwards they discussed the letter Harry had received that morning from the Weasley twins. They sent him their monthly report which included a response to the letter he had written them the previous month.

They couldn't say enough about the ideas that Harry had given them, though they were careful not to include any specifics for fear of the letter falling into the wrong hands. Apparently they were taking the concept and running with it. They refused his offer of money to help fund the project, saying they were making more than enough at the joke shop to pay for it, and judging by the monthly report he received, Harry couldn't disagree. They really were raking in the galleons. The twins were absolute geniuses, and Harry was interested to see what they would come up with when they put their creative talent to work in the war effort. There really wasn't much to discuss just yet, since the idea was just getting under way, but the twins seemed confident that they could make the items Harry mentioned in addition to a few others they were already brainstorming.

After storing the letter in his desk, he turned to Ginny. "So what do you want to do about Malfoy?" She only cocked an eyebrow in response, so Harry continued. "I can't imagine you'll just let him get away with knocking you off your broom. I figured you'd want some revenge, and I want in on it."

"You know that map you have?" she asked. "Do you think it would be possible to make a copy of it? Just the layout of the castle, I mean," she quickly amended. "I think it's time this castle became a little less friendly for Draco Malfoy."

She listed some ideas that she had, causing an evil smirk to work its way across Harry's lips. When they had been scheming against Ron earlier in the year, he had shot down some of her nastier suggestions because he was her brother and his friend. Malfoy, on the other hand, was neither her brother nor his friend, and Harry was less inclined to keep things tame. Ginny felt the same way. It looked like Malfoy was about to have a very bad term.

Her basic idea was to make the castle a completely unpredictable place for Malfoy. They would set up a slew of pranks throughout the castle that were set to activate only under specific circumstances. One could be placed on a single step of a staircase and only go off every fifth time Malfoy stepped on it. Another could be triggered only on certain days of the week, that type of thing. She basically wanted to make it so that Malfoy never knew when, why, or how he would be hit.

Once they planned out what they were going to do, a thought struck Harry. He had actually wondered about it during the party but never got a chance to bring it up with Ginny. Now that he had her alone, he took the opportunity. "Ginny, I was wondering..." he trailed off.

"Yes? What is it Harry?" she inquired curiously.

"Well yesterday, when you were talking with your friends, I've never seen you like that," he explained uneasily and rather unhelpfully.

"What do you mean?" she asked, frowning slightly.

"I don't know. You were all giggly and excited about the latest dress robes and hairstyles. I just never knew you were really into that stuff," he told her.

"All girls are into that kind of stuff to some extent. Even Hermione is at times," she answered him, wondering where he was going with this.

"Oh. I've never seen you like that before, or heard you talk that way..." he trailed off for a moment again wondering if he should say

this next thing. Shrugging to himself, he continued. "Did you really mean what you said about yourself?"

"What I said?" she parroted back in confusion.

"About your body...and how it would never look good in certain clothes," Harry explained uneasily, hoping he wouldn't have to go into further detail. Ginny's brow furrowed as she tried to think of what she had said the day earlier. Harry was silently praying she would to avoid having to explain things any further. Sadly, his prayers went unanswered.

"What did I say, exactly?" she asked him.

Harry blushed lightly, though he tried to temper it down. "Err – that you, uh, don't have the right...figure for them." She continued to look at him perplexedly. Harry opened his mouth to say more but found it to be suddenly quite dry. He began gesturing with his hands unconsciously, and they said what his mouth was unable to.

"My breasts?" she asked him, and if he didn't know better he'd swear there was some amusement in her voice.

Harry blushed a deep red as he nodded. He was unable to look her in the eyes.

"They're not big enough to fill out some of the newer styles of dress robes," Ginny explained a little too easily for Harry's liking. How could she talk about something like this so casually? "They're nowhere near as big as girls' like Lavender's or Claire's or Melissa's," she said critically.

"I think they're perfect," Harry replied genuinely as he looked up and met her eyes. A second later his face lit up and his gaze reverted to the floor as his brain caught up with what he had said. He missed Ginny's bright smile and light blush.

"Thank you, Harry. I appreciate that," she said sincerely.

“Right...” Harry said uneasily. “Err – shall we move onto your training?” he asked in hopes to change the subject.

Ginny had come a long way since her first animagus lesson. Technically they hadn’t really even been working on the animagus transformation, but they were working on wandless magic. Ginny was gaining more and more control over her magic as time passed by. She was now able to control the simpler spells like the hover charm with relative ease, so long as the object she was hovering was lightweight.

Where her control had once been choppy at best, it was now smooth. The movements were no longer jerky as they had once been, and her confidence was gaining rapidly. At first she continually bugged Harry about when she’d be able to try a partial transformation again, but after a couple weeks of being continually shot down, she had left it up to Harry’s discretion. Seeing her confidence soaring as it was, Harry decided that now was the time to put her skills to the test.

“I want you to try turning your hand into a paw again,” Harry informed her after they had settled down.

She turned surprised eyes to him. “Really? Do you think I’m ready for that?”

Harry smiled widely at her and nodded. “Yes, I think you are. Just remember not to get too discouraged if you don’t get it right away. I have every confidence that you will get it with just a bit of practice.”

Her eyes twinkled in happiness as her smile stretched across her face. “Oh, I cannot wait. This is so exciting,” she cried, hugging Harry around his neck energetically.

Twenty minutes later, they were both staring at her left hand, which had yet to change in any way. “I just don’t get it. Why isn’t this working? I don’t feel anything,” Ginny roared in frustration. The likeness to that of a lion was comical, given the form she was trying to change into. But Harry knew that now was not the time to laugh.

Harry let her stomp around for a moment before speaking up. "Take a couple deep breaths and relax. Getting upset about it is not going to help matters." He waited patiently as she glared at him for a long moment before heeding his advice. When her face began to soften up, he spoke again. "Now talk to me. Tell me what you're doing."

"I'm not doing anything. I'm trying to change my hand into a paw, but it's not working," she shouted at him.

"And yelling isn't going to help any," Harry calmly retorted.

"I'm sorry," she said after a long moment. "I just wish I could do this. I want to be an animagus so badly."

"You can do it," Harry attempted to comfort her. "It's just going to take a little time and effort. Like I said, I have every confidence that you will get this with a little bit of work. Now tell me what you're doing, really doing. How are you trying to make the change?"

Ginny took another deep breath before explaining herself. "Well I'm calling forth my magic, I guess you'd say." She gave him a quizzical look, and he nodded for her to go on. "And I'm trying to get it like it feels when I'm doing transfigurations, like you said, since that's what the animagus transformation is based off of."

"Right, that's good, but you have to make sure you leave some room for flexibility. It's similar, but it's not exactly the same. That's the closest thing I can point you to in how the magic feels, but it is fundamentally different from regular transfiguration. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because you're doing the magic to yourself? Or perhaps it's just unique to the transformation, since it's not a regular transfiguration. The animal is a part of you, so it's different than turning a mouse into a cat, because the two aren't related at all," Harry attempted an explanation. The truth was, he didn't really know what he was talking about. He was just speculating. But he did know that the magic felt different than it did for regular transfiguration, and that's all that mattered at the moment.

“Ok,” she replied somewhat glumly. “So how do I manage that if I don’t know what it feels like?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I wish I’d paid more attention when I was learning. But I learned the transformation around the same time I discovered my wandless abilities, so I didn’t have much experience to judge by at the time.”

Ginny sighed. “I wish you could just show me what it feels like. It would make life so much easier.” She slumped down into one of his armchairs and stared into the roaring fire glumly.

Harry looked sharply at her. “Maybe I can,” he said more to himself than to her. “I wonder...” Harry thought back to when he was learning to become an animagus. He had taken the potion to reveal his forms when he was beginning to understand how to feel the magic within you. During the visions, he was able to feel the magic of the two animals, making it easy to copy once he tried to transform. He wished he had thought of that before giving Ginny the potion. Had he taught her to feel the magic first, she would probably find the process much easier. But if he could show her what his magic feels like during the transformation that would probably be enough.

“What was that?” she asked him, craning her neck towards where he sat on the edge of his desk.

“I was just wondering if maybe I could just show you. Maybe I could get the magic feeling the way it should, then will it to pour into you. If we were holding hands, say, maybe I’d be able to will the magic into your hand,” Harry mused aloud.

“Do you think that will work?” she asked as she began to grow excited again.

“It couldn’t hurt to try, right?” he asked her. “I don’t want you to get your hopes up though. I’ve never tried this type of thing before. I have no idea whether or not it will work.”

“Well let’s give it a shot,” she exclaimed, beaming at him as she rose from her chair.

“Alright,” he said, also rising onto his feet. “Um, here, give me your hand.”

She stepped forward and clasped her left hand to his right. Ginny gazed into Harry’s face expectantly waiting for him to do whatever it was he needed to do.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” he said. After a short moment he continued, “Alright, I have my magic the way it should be. I’m making it run down my arm and into my hand, and now I’m going to will it into yours. Okay?”

“Mmhm,” she immediately replied, having difficulties standing still. “Oh,” she said, almost jerking her hand away from him in surprise. “I can feel it,” she said in awe after a moment. “It is different, but also the same. You’re right, that would be hard to explain.”

“See?” he wheedled. “I was thinking of my panther form when I did it, so it should hopefully be really close to what your lion should feel like.” He studied her as she took all of this in, still holding her hand in his.

“Lioness,” she corrected him with a playful grin.

“Forgive me. How I could make such a grievous mistake I shall never know,” Harry recited, bowing slightly to her.

“Prat.” She whacked him on the arm for good measure, releasing his hand in the process.

“You wound me, woman,” Harry cried out, clutching his arm as if a basilisk fang had just penetrated it. He relented when she raised her arm again in warning. “So are you ready to give it another shot?”

“Show me what it should feel like one more time. You distracted me, and now I’ve lost it,” she told him sternly.

“My apologies,” he intoned solemnly, once again offering his hand to her.

He repeated the process, and soon she was ready to try changing her hand into a paw again. Her first try yielded interesting results. “You’re a hairy beast,” Harry exclaimed, taking her arm in his hand to examine the results.

Golden fur had sprouted all over her hand, and her nails had lengthened a bit, but other than that, it was still a hand. But it was a step in the right direction. “Gimme that,” she said, snatching her hand back from him. After a moment it changed back into her hand. “Well at least I got that part right,” she said with a laugh. “I’d hate to have to walk around with a hairy hand all day. And those nails looked lethal.”

Harry chuckled along with her. She made an awfully good point though. He wasn’t sure that he’d be able to help her change back if things did go badly. She continued to work on transforming her hand to a paw and back for the next half hour or so. By the end of that time, she was able to make the transformation consistently. She looked as though she was walking on air, she was so happy. Harry couldn’t help but feel quite pleased himself.

While Harry and Ginny were working in Harry’s office, Hermione was sitting in an overstuffed armchair by the fire in the Gryffindor Common Room. In a rare moment of distractedness, her book lay forgotten in her lap as her mind wondered off to other things. She stared into the flickering flames as she pondered over the boy she considered to be one of her best friends, Harry Potter. That was apparently an important distinction to make since he no longer considered her to be one of his best friends.

She thought over everything that had happened at lunch today. When she had first overheard Harry making plans for the seating arrangements, she was initially upset that he hadn’t seen fit to consult her to see if she or Ron minded whomever he was inviting to sit with

them. When it became clear that she and Ron weren't even being factored into the equation, she had seen red. She could not believe Harry would do something like that.

So she yelled at him. Perhaps it wasn't the wisest course of action, especially given how tense and upset he must have been for the past couple weeks. Ron really did have the emotional range of a teaspoon, but that was beside the point. Harry had gotten upset and had responded in kind, which escalated the whole thing out of hand. She really shouldn't have let herself lose control of the situation the way she had. She would have to be more careful in the future.

Harry was obviously still upset with Ron over the Quidditch team, and he was directing some of that anger onto her since she had spent most of her time with Ron during their estrangement. She could see his reasoning there. She had known Ron was wrong for what he did – she had even told him so – but Harry wouldn't know that. He must have assumed that she had taken Ron's side in the matter. But she really just tried to stay out of it altogether. She told Ron how she felt about his decision, then let the matter drop figuring the two of them would eventually work it out on their own. She had tried fixing things between them in the past, but they tended just to need time to settle down and get over their anger. At least Ron did, anyway. Harry was generally just happy to have things back to normal and would just forget anything was wrong.

She really couldn't understand what was going on with Harry. She had expected some resistance, of course, but she didn't think even he was this stubborn. All term long he had been avoiding her questions, insisting he was fine. He also had a tendency to disappear for long periods of time, and no one ever seemed to know where he was. He would tell them he was in his office studying, but she found the explanation to be a bit fishy.

She had a feeling that Harry was using his private office to practice new spells, ones they hadn't yet covered in class. Harry was often the first or one of the first to master a spell in all of his classes. She shared classes with him for the past five years, and she had never known him to pick up spells so quickly. It was obvious that something

wasn't quite right there, and that was the best explanation she could come up with.

The only person who might be able to shed some light on Harry was Ginny, and the girl had proven unwilling to help in the past. She was buying Harry's façade, and if Hermione wasn't mistaken, Ginny was falling for Harry, again. On the other hand Harry was clinging to Ginny like a lifeline, to avoid all that was troubling him. And Ginny was welcoming him with open arms. Hermione feared how that would end.

She would really love to see Harry and Ginny get together. She thought they were well suited for one another, but with everything going on right now, she feared that they would ruin any shot they might have by getting together now. When Harry finally broke down, he was likely to lash out at those closest to him. Ginny would bear the brunt of that now, and Hermione didn't think she was prepared to handle that. Instead, it could very well destroy whatever had been built between them and leave Harry feeling more empty and alone than ever before. And she didn't imagine Ginny would take it well either.

She knew that something had to be done, but what? It was obvious that what she was doing with Harry now just wasn't working. And it was becoming abundantly clear to her that she could not do this alone. She turned away from the fire to look at Ron, sitting in the chair across from hers. He was staring out into the Common Room, the book in his lap not even opened. Typical. If she was going to actually get to Harry, she was going to need all the help she could get. Ron was probably her best place to start.

"What are we going to do about Harry?" she asked him.

His head swiveled toward her. "Whassat?"

"What are we going to do about Harry?" Hermione repeated slowly as if talking to a small child.

He looked at her dumbly for a moment before asking, "What do you mean?"

Hermione huffed in annoyance. "Harry is drifting apart from us. He's not talking to us. He's hiding things and not talking about any of his problems. He's gong to break down eventually if we don't do something. I can't help him on my own. I've been trying all term. We need to work together in this."

"I dunno," Ron replied thickly as he arched his right arm behind his head and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I don't think we should push him. He's mad enough at me right now, and I'd rather not do anything to make that worse."

"But this is so much bigger than that," Hermione insisted.

"Harry didn't seem too happy with you either. He said something about you not listening to him and letting things go. I think this is one of those times he's talking about," Ron replied carefully.

"But we're his family, Ron," Hermione pleaded desperately. "If we don't help him, who will? He might not like us for it right now, he probably doesn't even realize how much he needs our help, but he'll thank us in the long run. He needs us Ron. We can't give up on him now."

Ron still looked doubtful. "I think we should leave him be."

"Ugh," Hermione growled in frustration. "Fine, be that way." She stuffed her face back in her book and ignored Ron. She still wasn't really reading, however. Her thoughts were now focused on what it would take to get Ron to help her. She thought he would be easier to convince, but he was obviously weary of making Harry any angrier at him. Not that she could blame him with how badly he had hurt Harry. She let out a long sigh from behind the cover of the book. This was all turning out much more difficult than she had thought.

But she refused to give up. Harry had said that he saw her as a sister, and she knew that Harry wouldn't say that kind of thing lightly. Harry hardly ever let on how he was feeling about anything. She felt the

same way about Harry. He was the brother she never had, and she was not about to fail him.

Later that night, Harry lay in bed thinking about the day. He thought about his training session with Ginny. He had learned something new and potentially huge in that lesson. He managed to make her feel his magic so that she would know what she needed to do in order to manage the transformation. It opened up a potential world of opportunities. Maybe he could teach Ginny other wandless spells through that method. If Ginny wanted to continue to build up her wandless abilities, this would probably help a lot.

It wouldn't allow him to just transfer everything he knew right away. She would still need to practice with it as was evident by the initial problems Ginny was still having in turning her hand into a paw. But it would certainly speed things up quite a bit. He pondered over the possibilities. He wondered if physical contact was needed or if the caster had to will the magic into the other person for them to feel it. Could he perhaps feel the magic of a spell being cast by someone in the same room as him even if he had no contact with that person and the spell wasn't even aimed at him? He had no idea, but he was sure as hell going to find out.

His thoughts soon turned to the upcoming ball. Harry thought that everything was going perfectly except one thing: the dancing. He didn't know how to dance. He had only danced for one song in his fourth year, and Parvati had led him because he had no idea what he was doing. That one dancing experience was enough to last him a lifetime. But here he was again, only this time was a little different. He had gone with Parvati because he needed somebody to go with as a Triwizard Tournament Champion. He was sure she knew that, at least now if not at the time.

But this ball was different. He had asked Ginny to go with him right off the bat because he wanted to go with her. And she would most likely want to dance for a good portion of the evening. Harry was determined to make the night enjoyable for Ginny, which meant that he'd have to put up with the dancing with good grace. But he also remembered the last Yule Ball, which Ginny had attended with Neville.

Poor Neville was such a horrid dancer that Harry wouldn't have been surprised if Ginny's toes were bleeding by the end of the night. Harry did not want Ginny to have to go through that again.

He had to dance with Ginny, and he wanted her to enjoy the experience. That really only left him with one option. Harry would have to learn how to dance. The only real question was how he was going to learn. He would need someone to teach him, a girl preferably. Names began flying through his head. He could go to Hermione with this, of course. He knew she would be willing to help him, but something held him back.

Going to Hermione for dancing lessons would require spending a lot of time alone and in private with her. It wasn't that Harry was nervous being around Hermione or anything. Things were still rocky with her, however, and he feared that she would use the opportunity to bombard him with questions and to try to get him to talk about Sirius and his feelings and all that other garbage she was convinced that he needed to talk through. He was also a little embarrassed about the fact that he needed dancing lessons, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted the whole thing to be a surprise, to Ginny especially but to everyone else as well.

Even still, Harry probably would have gone to Hermione if not for the problems they had been having. But with Hermione out of the way, Harry didn't know whom else he could go to for help. He started going through all the girls he knew well enough to ask. Ginny was easy to dismiss since she would be his date to the ball. He could go to Parvati since she obviously knew how to dance, but he still felt bad about the way he had treated her at the last ball, and it would be awkward to ask for her help. He wasn't very close with her to begin with.

The next female student he was closest to was Luna. But Harry didn't think asking her for dancing lessons would be a great idea. For one thing, he didn't even know whether or not she could dance. But Luna was just too abnormal to ask for that kind of help. Even if she could dance, she never did make much sense to Harry. He wasn't sure that he'd be able to learn anything from her.

He knew Tonks well enough, he supposed. But she wasn't at Hogwarts, which would make arrangements difficult to make. Though he was sure he could talk to a certain werewolf friend of his if he needed. But Tonks was a klutz. She couldn't walk into a room without bumping into something, so she was definitely not an ideal dancing partner in Harry's opinion.

Mrs. Weasley was another candidate, but he would again run into the problem of actually finding a time and place to meet with her for them. Plus it would be somewhat embarrassing for Harry to go to her with this kind of help, especially since Ginny was the one he was learning to dance for. So Harry quickly vetoed her as well.

Professor McGonagall might be able to help him, Harry mused. She was in Hogwarts, which would make the arrangements manageable. He had seen her dancing at the last ball, and she seemed to get on pretty well. He would most likely be able to get lessons from her in private, which would keep it a surprise. She was a busy woman, though, and he didn't want to impose on her. But maybe he could make an arrangement of some sort with her. He could help her by grading essays for her lower year classes, much as he did in DADA with Professor Caldwell.

Harry was beginning to think that she might be his best bet. The only problem left was working out how to ask her. Professor McGonagall had been very kind to him lately, praising him in class. She had commended him highly when she had attended his HA classes, and she had even invited him to call her Minerva in private, which still unnerved Harry a little bit. But asking her to teach him how to dance would be embarrassing. Still, she was the best candidate he could think of, and he couldn't teach himself. It was either Professor McGonagall or Hermione. And he feared that exposing himself to Hermione in private that much would only further damage their relationship. He wasn't willing to risk that.

With that decided Harry was finally able to drift off to sleep. As had been custom over the past several months, Sirius was there waiting for him. The previous night Harry had told him about several of the events that took place on Saturday, including Ginny's near fall and his fallout with Ron. He conveniently forgot to mention the backrub he

had given Ginny and the time he had spent with her in his office at the end of the night.

He'd told Sirius his worries about his friendship with Ron and his uncertainty with where things would go from there. The only real betrayal among his best friends that Sirius had experienced had resulted in the death of Harry's prison and Sirius's false imprisonment for a dozen years. So he didn't have any particularly wise words on how to deal with the situation, but it was still nice to have someone to talk to about it who wasn't really involved.

Given the conversation they had shared the previous evening, it was only natural that he wasted little time before asking, "So how were things with Ron today?"

"A little awkward, but not so bad I guess," Harry replied gruffly.

"That's good, right?" Sirius asked him confusedly.

"Yeah, but Hermione was being a pain again today," he explained with a shrug. "We got into a bit of an argument over the seating arrangements for the ball because she just assumed I'd be saving the two of them seats at the table. They hadn't even told me they were going together yet. For all they knew, I had no idea. Then she tried to act like I was betraying her and Ron, and made some snide remark about how that's no way to treat one's family."

"Ouch," Sirius remarked sympathetically.

"Yeah. I never should have told her I thought of her like a sister," Harry replied. Sirius just looked at him pointedly. Harry sighed. "Okay, maybe I don't mean that, but it just makes me mad that she'd throw something like that in my face."

"I know, Harry. You could always prank her to get even," he suggested with a wicked grin.

Harry smirked. "Actually, my pranking time seems like it will be all filled up for a while." At Sirius's eager expression Harry proceeded to

inform him what he and Ginny had discussed about their plans for Malfoy. As he explained Ginny's idea, a predatory grin formed on his godfather's face.

"Didn't I tell you, Harry? There's the spirit of the Marauder's in that one!" he exclaimed.

Harry rolled his eyes and began telling him about the map he was going to make when a thought struck him. "Do you think it would be possible to recreate the Marauder's Map, but with a little extra functionality?" he asked his godfather.

Sirius frowned slightly in thought. "What did you have in mind?"

Harry explained to him his idea. And a grin spread across Sirius's face. "That would be absolutely perfect for what Ginny has in mind," he proclaimed. "I'm not sure how to go about getting that new stuff to work, but I can certainly point you to where we did our research for the original map."

"So do you think it's possible then?" Harry asked him.

Sirius shrugged. "No idea, but even if it is, when has that ever stopped you, eh?" he said with a large grin as he gave Harry a nudge with his elbow.

Harry grinned back ruefully.

"Seriously, Harry. If anyone can make it happen, you can. You've done nothing but continually amaze me since June. I'm sure you'll find a way to make it happen."

Sirius spent the rest of the night talking about what they had done to create the original Marauder's Map and listing some starting points for Harry's research.

Transfiguration was first thing the next morning, and Harry entered the classroom with a little trepidation. He planned to stay after class to ask her about dancing lessons, and he also planned to butter her

up by paying close attention and excelling in the day's lesson. Harry sat towards the front of the room with his friends and waited patiently for Professor McGonagall to begin class.

Right at the ring of the bell, McGonagall rose from her seat and began the lesson. "Good morning class. Today we will be working on human transfiguration, as you should all already know from your assigned readings for today's lesson." She swept the classroom with her stern glare telling better than words what she would do to anybody who didn't do the reading.

"Human transfiguration is not so different from other mammal transfigurations, just a little more complex because our bodies and minds are more complex than any animal's," she continued. "Today you will be working with a partner and attempting to change their hand into the paw of a cat. You will not attempt to change any other part of your partner's body in any way unless I explicitly ask you to do so. Human transfiguration can be extremely dangerous, and I will not tolerate any horseplay during this lesson. Is that understood?"

She once again swept the class with her strict gaze before continuing. "There is one major difference when doing a full transfiguration from human to animal compared to animal to animal. Can anyone tell me what that is?"

Harry raised his hand in the air. He was surprised to find that he was the only one. Not even Hermione had raised her hand. "Yes, Mr. Potter," McGonagall called.

"When you transfigure animal to animal or object to animal, you want to change the mind of the animal as well. Otherwise, if you change a mouse into a bird without changing its mind, it's not going to know how to act as a bird. And it might even go into shock as a result. When changing a human to animal, you need to keep the human mind intact, lest you possibly damage the mind of your target. And a human target will find it easier to cope with the transfiguration because we at least know what's happening."

“Very good, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall praised. “Ten points to Gryffindor.” When Harry turned, he noticed Hermione giving him a suspicious look that he wasn’t quite sure how to take. His attention was focused back to the front of the room when McGonagall continued. “The incantation for the spell is *homo inflectus*. May I have a volunteer so I can demonstrate the spell with the proper wand movements?”

Harry’s hand shot right back up into the air. “I’ll do it, Professor,” he said cheerfully.

She gave him a rare, brief smile. “Wonderful. Thank you, Mr. Potter. I often have much difficulty finding a volunteer for this particular exercise. Most people don’t like the idea of being transfigured into something else. I’ll demonstrate by changing your hand into a paw first and then complete the transformation by turning you into a cat. Is that alright with you?”

“Yes,” Harry replied simply with a slight nod.

“Excellent,” the normally stern professor responded. “Now I want all of you to watch me carefully, and that includes you, Mr. Potter,” she said, turning to Harry. Harry smiled and nodded his understanding. “The wand movement is a diagonal slash down and across your body, then across, and back diagonally and up, followed by a slight jab.” She did the movements as she explained them to the class. “Now pay close attention. Ready Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded his head again and said, “Yes, Professor.”

Professor McGonagall began the wand movement as she loudly and clearly intoned, “*Homo inflectus*.” The last syllable was spoken as she jabbed her wand at Harry’s outstretched arm.

Harry watched as his hand sprouted fur and changed shape into a cat’s paw. The process wasn’t foreign to him since he had changed his hand into a paw numerous times when he was training to be an animagus. He extended and retracted his claws once, then turned to the professor with a grin.

“Does your hand hurt in any way, Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked him.

Harry looked at her quizzically. “No. Is it supposed to?”

“No, no, of course not,” Professor McGonagall quickly replied. “I merely wanted you to answer for the benefit of the class, so they’d know not to fear the transformation.”

“Oh,” Harry replied, nodding his head. “That makes sense then. No, it doesn’t hurt at all. It does feel a little weird where it changes from my regular arm to the cat’s paw. It’s not uncomfortable or anything like that, just odd.” He addressed this to the students who were all paying avid attention.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall told him. “Now if you are ready and still willing, I’d like to turn you into a full cat.”

“I’m ready whenever you are,” Harry replied cheerfully.

McGonagall performed the spell yet again, and Harry disappeared from view. Standing where he had been just moments before was a small black cat. The cat meowed from the ground and moved its limbs experimentally. It felt similar to being a panther but also different. The basic mechanics were the same, though, so he only felt a little awkward as he began to walk forward.

“Mr. Potter, would it be all right if I picked you up and placed you on my desk so that the class could see you more easily,” McGonagall asked the cat on the ground.

Harry looked up at her, meowed, then turned and leapt onto her desk on his own. He turned back and gave her a cat’s version of a cheeky grin. “Very good, Mr. Potter. Now, normally a person transfigured into an animal would have much difficulty moving around at first because the entire body and muscle structure is completely different. Mr. Potter, here, appears to be a quick learner in that regard. A feat such

as jumping up onto the desk would not be easily performed by the average wizard who had been turned into a cat for the first time.”

Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry. “If you would jump back down to the ground, I will change you back to normal.” Once Harry complied, McGonagall spoke up again. “Now pay attention everyone, and you too, Mr. Potter,” she added looking pointedly at the cat sitting at her feet. “The incantation for reversing this spell is *revertō homo*, and the wand movement is a slight downward curve across your body like this and a flick.” She performed the appropriate movements as she explained them.

“Now then,” she said, turning back to Harry. “Ready?” Harry meowed in response, nodding his head slightly. “*Revertō homo*.” Harry reappeared moments later with a large grin on his face.

“That was fun,” he exclaimed.

McGonagall gave him an appeasing smile then turned to the class. “As you can see, Mr. Potter has suffered no ill effects from the transformation. Now everybody partner up and take turns attempting to turn your partner’s hand into a paw. And if I see anybody trying to change anything besides a hand or into anything but a paw, the consequences will be most severe.”

Harry turned to his friends. Hermione immediately asked, “How did you know the answer to her question?”

“I don’t know,” he replied with a shrug. “I read it somewhere.”

“But that’s not in the text book,” she insisted.

“I read more than text books,” Harry explained impatiently. “You guys go ahead and partner up,” he said motioning to Ron and Hermione. “I think I’ll work with Neville today.”

He faintly caught Hermione huffing her displeasure but ignored her as he grabbed Neville. “Hey Neville, want to partner up with me?”

Neville turned to Harry with surprised eyes. "Sure," he said.

"Great," Harry replied. "So do you want to go first, or should I?"

"You go ahead," Neville immediately said. "I'm no good in Transfiguration. I don't know why you'd want to partner with me. I'll probably turn your hand into something awful."

"That's not true, Neville," Harry told him honestly, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You've been doing a lot better this year, haven't you? I'll bet it was just your dad's wand that was holding you back before. The wand chooses the wizard, they say. Now that you've got a wand suited to you, you've been doing great."

Neville smiled at Harry but still seemed unsure of himself. "All right," Harry said. "I'll give it a go then, shall I?" Neville nodded nervously but dutifully held out his hand for Harry to practice on. Harry grinned at his friend and reassured him, "Don't worry mate, it really doesn't hurt at all. Ready?"

"Yeah," the boy replied tentatively.

When Harry raised his wand to begin the spell, Neville shut his eyes tightly, unable to watch. Harry slashed and jabbed with his wand as he intoned, "Homo inflectus." As was usual for Harry, he felt the rush of magic running through his veins. He quickly poured his magic into the spell and willed it out of his wand, all the while concentrating on turning Neville's hand into a cat's paw. Harry watched in fascination as brown fur sprouted on what was Neville's hand but was quickly becoming a cat's paw. "See, mate. That didn't hurt, did it?"

Neville opened his eyes at Harry's question and glanced down at his new appendage. He let out an audible gasp as he held up his paw for closer scrutiny. He marveled at it for a long moment, turning his arm around so he could see it from every angle before finally proclaiming it "Wicked!"

Harry smiled at Neville. The shy boy was long gone, but Neville was still slow to come out of his shell. He was becoming more openly

friendly and outgoing among friends as the days passed by. Harry couldn't have imagined Neville making such a declaration in the middle of class the previous year, but he was glad to see the change.

"How did you do that?" Hermione demanded, walking over to their table.

"Huh?" Harry asked thickly.

"How did you get the spell so quickly?" Hermione repeated forcefully.

"I just did what Professor McGonagall told us to do," Harry casually replied. "I just got lucky to get it so quick is all," trying to play it off. He really didn't want to get into it with her, especially today when he was trying to butter up Professor McGonagall.

"Hmph." Hermione did not look impressed with his answer.

"What's all the fuss about?" Professor McGonagall asked as she strode toward them. She made a small correction to Ron's wand movement as she passed him by on her way to Harry and Neville. "Now what have we here?" Neville held up his paw for her inspection, and she let out a gasp. "Excellent work. Full marks, and twenty points to Gryffindor. How many tries was it before you managed it?"

Neville spoke up before Harry had a chance to answer. "This was his first try," the boy said shooting a smirk at Harry, whose cheeks tinged a slight shade of pink.

"Really?" she asked, turning from Neville to Harry. He heard Hermione groan in the background but didn't have time to pay her any attention. Harry shrugged at Professor McGonagall in response, a little uncomfortable with her enthusiasm. "Incredible. Have you tried changing it back into his hand yet?"

Harry shook his head. "No, we hadn't gotten that far yet."

"Well carry on then. Let's see you give the spell a try," she instructed.

Harry dutifully lifted his wand as Neville held out his paw. Harry took a deep breath, and then cast the spell. "Reverto homo," he called out. As he flicked his wand, the brown fur began to disappear, and soon Neville's hand was as it should be once again.

"Excellent work, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall praised him. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone master this spell so quickly. I'll let you two get back to practicing. I want you to continue practicing the spell as well, Mr. Potter. You need to make sure you can consistently perform the spell correctly." Seeing Harry's nod she continued. "Carry on then." She walked back to her desk and left the boys to their work.

Hermione looked like she wanted to continue her interrogation, but she was interrupted by Professor McGonagall. "Back to work Miss Granger. This is an incredibly difficult spell and will require the entire class and then some for most to get it right." She stomped away without another word.

The rest of the class flew by quickly. Harry helped Neville with the spell as well as he could, and by the end of the class, Neville was able to make Harry's hand grow plenty of black fur, but he hadn't managed to completely turn it into a paw yet. The only other student in the class who did manage the full change was Hermione. Several others had managed hands full of fur, like Neville. And a few others were struggling even more with the spell.

As she called for the end of class she turned towards Harry and said, "Mr. Potter, I'd like you to remain after class for a moment."

"Sure thing, Professor," Harry replied with a secret smile. He needed to talk with her after class anyway, and she just gave him an excuse to hang around while everybody else left. Harry packed up his things and waved to his friends as they all left the classroom wishing him luck. Once the last of the students had left, Harry approached her desk. "You wanted to see me, Professor?" he asked her.

"It's Minerva when we're in private," she chided good-naturedly. "Have a seat."

Harry smirked and sat down on top of the desk directly in front of hers. "Minerva, then. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"When I changed you into a cat, how did it feel to move around?" she asked suddenly.

Harry furrowed his brow in confusion, wondering where this was going. "I don't know. It was a little awkward at first, but I think I got the hang of it pretty quickly," he replied carefully.

"Yes, that's what it looked like to me as well," she said absently while lost in thought.

"I have a question about that, actually," Harry spoke up. She turned her attention to him and nodded for him to continue. "What's the difference between an animagus transformation and transfiguring yourself or someone else into an animal?"

"A very good question," she replied, "and part of the reason I asked you to remain after class," she added mysteriously. "First of all, the animagus transformation is done internally, without the use of a wand. If it required a wand, then nobody would be able to change back once they'd turned themselves into their animal. Secondly, the animagus has all the knowledge and instincts that the animal should have. The wizard is always in control of the animal, but you feel natural in the animal's body. You don't need to think about your movements, and your body will react instinctually much as your human body does in certain situations."

"That is not true for human transfiguration. The fact that you were able to move around as easily as you were while you were a cat suggests that you may have the animagus form of some kind of feline or something similar," she told him with a warm smile.

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise. He wasn't at all surprised at the declaration itself, more about the fact that she had made that deduction. He wasn't prepared to let his animagus forms into the public domain just yet.

“Of course,” she replied easily. “It not very common for a wizard or witch to even have an animagus form, and it is even rarer for them to ever complete the transformation. But I think you have the potential to accomplish it. Your performance in class today only reinforces the idea. It took me several tries to get the spell right when I was first learning it, and Transfiguration was always my best subject, as you no doubt have guessed. Even Miss Granger struggled with it for the majority of the day. It is not an easy spell to use, yet you seemed to have no issues with it. I think with the proper training that you could achieve the transformation, if you are willing to put forward the effort.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Harry asked, not sure what else to say. What could he say? It sounded as if she was going to offer to help train him to become an animagus, and he couldn’t just refuse her. That would look too suspicious, not to mention ungrateful. The only way he could really see to get out of it was to confess and show her the panther, but he wasn’t ready to let that particular secret out yet.

“I can see this is quite a surprise to you,” she said warmly. “If you continue to show promise, I would like you to consider entering into the training. I would be more than happy to help guide you through the process. I don’t think we would start until either the end of next term or the start of the fall term next year. I want to make sure you have a full grasp of human transfiguration before you even start the training.”

Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief. At least he wouldn’t have to deal with that problem today. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you, Prof – Minerva. I appreciate it.” And he really did. It was a very generous offer, after all.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” she kindly replied. “I will bring up the subject with you again next term if you continue to show the potential. But I don’t want you getting your hopes up. It is very likely that you do in fact have the form of a feline, but it is not a surety.”

“That would be great,” Harry immediately responded.

“Now, if you didn’t have anything else…” she began to say, when Harry interrupted.

“Actually, I had another question. Or a favor to ask would be more accurate, I guess,” Harry said carefully.

“Oh?” she curiously inquired.

“Well, as you know the ball is coming up. After the disaster that the last ball turned out to be, I’ve been determined to make this one better. I asked my preferred date right away. Ron and Hermione are going together, so they hopefully won’t be blowing up at each other like last time. That takes care of two of the three biggest problems that plagued me two years ago,” Harry explained.

“And what was the third thing,” she prodded with interest.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Harry told her embarrassedly. His face flushed slightly, but he quickly squashed the emotion and fought to keep the blush down. He met with mild success.

“And what does that have to do with me?” she asked him.

“I was wondering if you might be willing to teach me,” he said hopefully.

She looked at him for a long moment, shocked at his request. Never in all of her years teaching had a student ever asked for a favor like that. She imagined that her stern countenance would frighten most away from ever asking, not that most students would have asked her anyway. “You want me to teach you to dance?” she asked him somewhat incredulously.

“I don’t want to impose on you,” Harry quickly added. “I’d be willing to make a trade of some sort. I’ve been grading essays for Professor Caldwell on occasion this year, and I thought maybe I could grade some of your lower year essays in exchange for lessons.” Harry stood up and shifted his weight on his feet uneasily.

“You’ve really thought this through then, haven’t you?” she inquired.

“Yes,” he said quite simply.

She thought it over for a long moment. It was an odd request but not completely inappropriate. Now that she thought about it, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to offer dancing lessons to the student body at large in future years if they continued to host these balls. She glanced at Harry and realized that he was waiting on her answer. She knew that Harry had put himself out on a limb just by asking for her help. She knew that it was not often that he actively sought out anybody’s help with anything, especially from an adult. And she was warmed by that thought. “That seems like more than a fair trade to me,” she finally told him.

“Really?” Harry asked. “Brilliant!” He pumped his fist in the air once for effect. “I want to keep this secret from everybody. It’s not that I don’t want them to know I’m taking lessons from you,” he quickly added. “I just want to be able to surprise everybody at the ball.”

She smirked at him, and they quickly set up a schedule that would have them meeting two times a week for an hour each time. Harry thanked her profusely the whole time, and soon enough they were beginning their first lesson. Mondays directly after their lesson worked for both of them, and it was convenient since they would already be together. Professor McGonagall moved the desks against the walls of the room with a flick of her wand to clear a spot for them to practice.

She disappeared into her office for a minute but reappeared shortly thereafter with a Wizard Wireless in hand. She set it on her desk and flicked her wand at it. A song began playing that Harry didn’t recognize at all. He watched as his professor seemed to consider something for a moment before nodding her head and muttering, “That will do.”

She strode over to Harry and began her instructions. She grabbed his arm and placed it at her hip as she placed her own hand on his shoulder. She clasped his free hand in her own informing him that this was the position for a traditional dance. She gently guided him

through the movements, both of them staring down at their feet as they moved in time with the movement. Harry was doing his best not to step on his professor's toes, and Minerva was watching Harry's feet and making corrections when needed.

Their time together ended quickly, and they made plans to meet every Monday and Friday right before lunch, which happened to be directly after class on Mondays. Harry headed down to the Great Hall for lunch. His friends, of course, wanted to hear all about what his meeting with McGonagall was about. "So what did Professor McGonagall have to say?" Hermione asked him directly.

"She just wanted to talk about how well I seemed to catch on to human transfiguration," Harry explained as he loaded food onto his plate. "We also talked about my HA classes," he added as an afterthought.

"How did you manage to get the spell so quickly?" Hermione immediately interrogated. "I mean, it is a rather difficult spell. I don't see how you could just get it on your first try."

"I don't know what to tell you," Harry replied as he stuck a forkful of steak and kidney pie into his mouth. "Just got lucky I guess."

Hermione huffed.

"What's the big deal, Hermione?" Neville asked. "He really did get it on his first try. I should know since I'm the one he was casting the spell on. He even helped me with the spell. I almost had it right, too."

"You'll get it, mate," Harry encouraged him. "You were right there. I bet you'll have it next class, no problem."

"You're assuming that's the first time he ever tried to cast the spell," Hermione snapped irritably.

Neville's eyes bulged at her tone, but to his credit he didn't back down. Instead, he turned to Harry and asked, "Was that the first time you ever cast the spell?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, it was," he said simply.

"Well there you go," Neville continued, turning back to Hermione. "He did get it on the first try."

Oddly enough, that didn't seem to placate Hermione. "Rubbish. That's impossible. I bet even Professor McGonagall herself didn't manage the spell on her first try. It's incredibly complex. And Harry's never shown that much aptitude for Transfiguration before."

"That's not true," Neville interrupted. "He's been one of the first to get every spell all term long."

Harry was looking back and forth between the two as they continued arguing about him as though he wasn't there. He was grateful for Neville's involvement, as he was really getting sick and tired of defending himself to Hermione. He noticed that Ron's eyes traveling back and forth between the two as well, though Harry couldn't say for sure whom he was rooting for.

"Which means that today's just one of many oddities that Harry has to answer for," Hermione concluded.

"Excuse me?" Harry demanded while Neville asked, "And why should Harry have to answer for anything?"

Hermione chose not to answer; instead she just let out a groan of frustration as she rose from her seat at the bench and stormed out of the Great Hall. Ron slowly rose from his seat. He looked at Harry, then Neville, and back to Harry again. He looked like he wanted to say something but didn't know what. Instead he just shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and followed after Hermione.

Neville turned to Harry. "What's gotten into her?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't really know," Harry replied. And it was true. He really didn't know why she was making such a big deal out of the fact that he had gotten a spell right on the first try. He knew that she

always wanted to be the best and the first to get every spell, but he really didn't think she'd take that this far. There must be something else; if only he had any clue what.

"Thanks for sticking up for me, mate," he said to Neville after a long moment.

"Don't mention it," Neville replied easily. "That's what friends are for."

The week passed by in relative normalcy after that, though things were strained between Harry and both Ron and Hermione. There were no more arguments like the one during lunch on Monday, however. Harry spent a lot of time pouring over the Marauder's Map and researching in the library.

He had met Ginny a couple of times in the library to research some spells for the map and to go over what they would need to know for the pranks. They decided that it would be best if Harry did all the spell casting wandlessly to ensure that nothing could be traced back to them. Therefore, while Ginny was doing most of the research for all of the spells to be used in the pranks, she would show him what she found and take a few notes down to help him remember.

They sat at a table side by side as they each poured over their respective texts. Every so often Ginny would ask him what he was researching, but he wouldn't budge. He just told her that he had an idea that would be an enormous help to their...project. This only seemed to increase her excitement and encourage her to badger him even more, but he held firm knowing that the surprise would be worth it.

Thursday evening rolled around, and with it Harry's weekly Occlumency lesson with Professor Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore was a man who was not often surprised. After over 150 years of life, he had seen much more than most and often knew what to expect in any situation. He liked to think of himself as wise thanks to his many years of life experience, but he also liked to think that he hadn't yet lost his youthful vitality. It wasn't often he got

a chance to duel, but he could move as quickly as those less than half his age when the situation called for it.

There was one boy who often did surprise him, however. This boy had experienced more in his short life than many adults, and yet he continued to persevere. It seemed like every year carried a new surprise from this extraordinary boy. The latest surprise had occurred just last weekend. Young Ginevra Weasley had been knocked off her broom, and the boy had beaten him to her rescue. Not only that, but in the past even he had been unable to handle identical situations as effectively as this boy had.

Albus considered himself to be one of the quickest draws currently alive. Not many could get a spell off before him. Apparently Harry Potter was one of those precious few. Not only had Harry beaten him to the punch, but he had managed to stop Miss Weasley's descent entirely without causing her any harm, an impressive feat by any means and one that he had been pondering ever since. Perhaps tonight he would finally get his answers.

In his quest to get answers he had gone so far as to look at his memory of the event in his pensieve numerous times, but Harry was so far away that it was impossible to see him clearly. That far away and the image the memory created was fuzzy at best. Without his memory to aid him, he had little choice but to go to the source. Perhaps Harry could shed some light on how he had managed it. And he was coming up the stairs now.

"Come in, Harry," he called as the boy approached the door. He watched as Harry opened the door and strode into the room. He immediately made his way directly to Fawkes's perch, as was his habit.

"Hello Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore," the boy greeted as he stroked Fawkes.

"Good evening, Harry," he replied genially. "How are you doing this evening?"

“Pretty good, thanks. And yourself?”

“Marvelous,” Dumbledore responded as Harry made his way to the armchair in front of his desk.

“That was an interesting match last Saturday,” he commented offhandedly as he studied the boy for any reaction.

“It certainly was,” Harry replied unwaveringly. Nothing in his demeanor suggested that he was feeling any strong emotions with regards to the topic of conversation. Considering the circumstances surrounding the match that was quite surprising.

“Miss Weasley appears to make a more than adequate replacement for you,” he continued on conversationally.

This earned him a grin from the boy. “You’re not kidding! I’m just lucky she prefers to play chaser.”

“Indeed,” the Headmaster replied in open amusement. “Yet it was not her catch that drew the most attention that day,” he steered, hoping to find out more about Harry’s big catch.

“I suppose not,” Harry agreed. His voice and demeanor revealed nothing about his emotions but his eyes flashed something for a moment. It disappeared so quickly that he was unable to decipher what it was.

“Tell me,” he continued, “How is it that you were able to catch Miss Weasley?”

“Honestly?” Harry answered. “It wasn’t really a conscious decision. I noticed Malfoy just before he hit her, and I just knew what he was planning to do. So I reacted. I carry my wand in an arm holster at all times, so it was just a flick of the wrist and I was casting the spell before my brain even caught up with my body,” Harry explained with a shrug.

The Headmaster remained silent for a brief moment as he thought over the boy's answer. It made sense, but something about the explanation didn't sit entirely right with him. Not that the boy was necessarily lying, but that something was missing from the explanation, whether intentionally so or not. He almost asked if he could see Harry's memory of it, but decided he didn't want it to appear like he didn't trust the boy. "I had wondered at that. Your reaction was so quick that there was little explanation except that you had seen it coming a moment beforehand. Needless to say you acted with remarkable speed and excellent spellwork. I think 25 points to Gryffindor are in order," he said warmly.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied just as kindly.

"Well then, shall we move onto your lesson for the day?" he asked. The lesson went by well. Harry was finding that it took less effort to hold off the Headmaster's attacks each lesson. He was confident that he would soon be able to hold off his attacks completely without ever cracking. If he hadn't been a master Legilimens, Dumbledore would already find it impossible to break into Harry's mind.

After the end of the lesson, he wondered at Dumbledore's line of questions about how he'd caught Ginny. He hadn't thought about a cover story beforehand, but he felt the one he had fed to Dumbledore was believable and most like what the Headmaster would already have been thinking. Yet he couldn't help the niggles of doubt that crept up in his mind. Dumbledore had looked like he wanted to ask him something else, but had talked himself out of it. Harry decided that there was no use dwelling on it, as he couldn't change what had happened.

Harry met with Professor McGonagall for dance lessons again the next day. The lesson progressed much like the previous one. They were still going over the basic steps, watching Harry's feet to make sure he was getting the steps right. She took him through the steps of several dances. They covered several of the traditional dances such as the waltz and the foxtrot, among others.

Harry spent the majority of Friday evening in his office trying to finish his map project. He had studied the Marauder's Map extensively that week, using his newfound knowledge of magic to feel the magic built into the map. This, coupled with his talks with Sirius, allowed him to figure out the basics of what was used to put the map together. A little research and adaptation later, and Harry found himself building a new and improved map. He couldn't wait to show it to Ginny. They were supposed to meet the next morning to move ahead with their plans.

As was their custom, they met in Harry's office to get organized before heading out into the castle at large.

"So did you make me a map?" Ginny asked him the minute the door had closed behind her.

Harry smirked, looking at her in amusement.

"What're you smiling at?" she asked him. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were up to something."

"You might say that," Harry replied. "After hearing about what you had planned, I had an idea," Harry explained.

"Well, what was your idea?" Ginny immediately asked.

"Well you said you wanted a map so that you could easily keep track of what pranks you set up and where," Harry responded. Ginny nodded impatiently. "Well I thought I would take that one step further. With some of the ideas you told me, there would be more to keep track of than just where you put all the spells. If you want his robes to fade and tear every third time he walks on the fifth step down of some staircase, wouldn't it be helpful to not only know where the prank was laid but also how many times he's stepped on that particular stair?"

Ginny nodded eagerly. "That would be useful," she commented.

"I thought so too," Harry agreed. "I was thinking about last Monday and how I helped you feel the magic of the animagus transformation, and I had wondered if that same concept could be used elsewhere."

So I took the Marauder's Map and studied it. I tried feeling the magic that was put into it to make it work, and it worked; I could really feel it. It was a little jumbled up because there was so much spellwork involved, but I eventually managed to piece everything together. I did a little bit of research to help me out, and I was able to make another Marauder's Map with some additional features."

"That's amazing, Harry," Ginny gushed. "That has to be some incredibly advanced magic."

Harry shrugged, though he was proud of himself for accomplishing it.

"What else can your map do, then?" Ginny eagerly asked.

"Well, it has two modes, each unlocked with a different phrase. The first mode is identical to the Marauder's Map now. It shows you where everyone in the castle is. The second mode is for keeping track of pranks. It can show you who the prank is meant for, if specified, give a brief description of what the prank does, and of course shows you where it is on the map. It will also keep track of any extraneous details of the prank, like the number of times a step has been stepped on in the earlier example."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "You did all that?"

He nodded.

Ginny just stared at him for a long moment, making Harry increasingly uncomfortable, until she spoke again. "How does it work?"

Harry walked over to the side of his desk and lifted a large framed picture of the Gryffindor Common room onto the desktop. In the foreground you could see Ron setting up his chess board and sneaking glances at Hermione who had her books spread around her, while Harry and Ginny were sitting on one of the sofas talking to Neville. It was a great snapshot of life in Gryffindor Tower, which was one of the reasons that Harry had chosen it from the many that Colin had shown him. Harry gestured her towards the picture saying, "Tap

your wand against it and say, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

When she did just that, nothing happened. She turned a confused look to Harry. "Good, at least that part works," he replied. "I used what I had learned about wards to add an extra security feature. Only someone I have specifically keyed to the map will be able to use it. Here, I'll add you in," he said stepping beside her. He held his right hand over the picture stating, "I, Harry James Potter, solemnly swear that Ginevra Molly Weasley is up to no good."

The picture glowed blue, and Harry handed it back to her. "Give it another shot."

She did just that and watched in awe as the picture faded away and Hogwarts castle materialized before her eyes. Her eyes immediately sought out her own name and Harry's, which she found to be in Harry's office. Ron and Hermione were in the Common Room. Neville was outside in one of the greenhouses with Hannah Abbott. She couldn't help but smirk when she saw the two of them together. She cast her gaze up to meet Harry's eyes. "This is brilliant."

"You haven't seen its second function yet," Harry told her. "Tap it with your wand again and say, 'I solemnly swear that I am up to some serious pranking.'"

She did just that. After a moment she turned back to Harry. "I don't see anything different."

"Look at the door to my office," Harry suggested amusedly.

She did. It read: "Black hair charm. Ginevra Weasley. Triggered every: 1 time(s). Count: 1." Her wide eyes immediately shot back up to meet Harry's. "What?"

While she was looking at the map, Harry had conjured a mirror, which he now handed to her. Her chin fell to the ground. Staring back at her was a freckled girl with her face, her eyes, but definitely not her hair.

Gone were her fiery red locks. In its place was a head of pure black hair. "Surprise," Harry called out cheerfully.

"Harry James Potter," she yelled. After a moment's pause she continued on in a much calmer voice. "I don't know whether I should slap you or kiss you."

"You like it then?" he asked hesitantly.

"Like it?" she asked incredulously. "Are you kidding? This is bloody brilliant. I love it!"

"Good," Harry responded contentedly.

"As for my hair," Ginny continued in a harsher voice. "This charm better be off in about five seconds unless you want bat-bogeys flying around your face for the next five minutes."

Harry grinned. "As you wish," he said with a wave of his hand. When she looked back into the mirror, her red hair was back in all its glory. "I like it much better that way, anyway," Harry remarked.

"Well good," Ginny responded, "because I think I'll keep it this color, thank you very much. Now if you're finished playing tricks on me..." She paused to look at Harry, who nodded amusedly. "Shall we get started?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Harry replied.

The two of them set out into the halls of Hogwarts determined to make sure that Malfoy would rue the day he tried to hurt Ginny. At least he would if he ever figured out why all these terrible things were happening to him. They spent the majority of the day laughing as they pictured Malfoy's reaction to all the pranks they were setting up.

The next day, Harry had his IHA practicing dueling in a situation where you are outnumbered. He wasn't about to stick them in a situation where they were ten on one, but he did have them practice holding their own, surviving, when outnumbered two or three to one.

He didn't expect all of them to be able to come out on top of a duel in that type of situation, but if they were prepared, they might just be able to hold out until help arrived. That was his hope anyway.

Harry's dancing lessons continued on Monday. Professor McGonagall taught him another new dance step at the beginning of the lesson. As they spent the rest of the lesson reviewing the basics, she had Harry working on managing the steps while concentrating on his partner, rather than his feet.

"You need to be able to hold a conversation while you are dancing," she explained to him. "If you spend the entire evening concentrating on your feet, you may end up dancing well enough, but your date will be incredibly bored with nobody to talk to."

"Okay," Harry allowed.

"And it is important that you make eye contact while you are dancing. You cannot stare at your feet the entire time," she continued as they danced around the room. "You don't have to stare at your partner the entire time, but it's important that you pay extra attention to her. You can let your eyes wander to other couples, but don't stare."

"Alright," Harry articulated while concentrating both on what she was saying and on the dance.

"So tell me, Harry, how are your HA classes going?" she asked him after a moment.

"Erm, they're going pretty well I guess," he replied distractedly.

"Come on, Harry. You can give me more than that. You need to learn to dance without concentrating on it. By the time I'm done with you, you should be able to have a full conversation in the middle of a dance. And now is the time to start practicing," she instructed with a little of her usual stern countenance shining through.

The change in his strict Head of House in these lessons had been a real revelation to Harry. They had met a couple times privately earlier in the term, and she had been much more relaxed in those meetings, but to see her on a regular basis outside of the classroom setting was a world of difference. She actually let her hair down from the tight bun that she had always worn. She smiled regularly, and her tone of voice was completely different from what it normally was around the student body.

She was very patient and kind with him. She didn't get mad on the rare occasion that Harry missed a step and ended up on her toes. Harry was just grateful that those occasions were few and far between though, as he didn't want to test her patience in that regard. But when it did happen, she took it in stride and dismissed Harry's repeated apologies. It was only on a rare occasion that Harry glimpsed the woman he normally saw in the classroom.

"The classes are going well," Harry said uneasily, his concentration torn between his steps and his words. "There hasn't been much arguing between houses or anything lately. I don't think that's because they're getting along now. I think it's more that they understand that I will punish them for it if they even try."

"Yes, I must say you did handle the one situation I witnessed rather well," McGonagall commented. "Mr. Weasley seemed to be of the mind that he'd be able to get away with such a thing. I think you disavowed him of that thought rather nicely, if a bit confrontationally."

"Ron can be a bit thick at times, and he has a hot temper if you let him get going. But he also gets embarrassed rather easily. The best way to get him to stop what he was doing was to draw attention to him in a bad way. He won't be as quick to do something like that again if he thinks he'll get embarrassed for it as a result. He was angry with me for a couple days after that incident, but he got over it eventually," Harry explained. He loosened up as he continued his explanation. He wasn't as stiff in his movements, and he was no longer staring mostly at his feet.

“I’d say that’s a fair assessment of your friend, though rather negative. Did you feel bad for confronting Mr. Weasley?” she asked him.

“Surprisingly, I didn’t feel too bad about it,” Harry remarked. “I mean, he was the one who was trying to take advantage of me by picking on others during my class and thinking he could get away with it. He put me in a bad situation. If anything I should say he should be the one to feel bad about forcing me into that situation in the first place.” Harry was no longer even bothering to glance at his toes; he was so involved in their conversation.

“That’s a rather mature way of looking at – Oww!” she exclaimed as Harry stomped on her toes.

“ Oh, I’m so sorry Professor,” Harry hurriedly apologized, immediately backing out of their hold.

“Nonsense, Harry,” she told him as she kept a firm grip on his shoulder and hand. “You’re doing well. We were talking for several minutes, and you were dancing perfectly. A small slipup every once in awhile is nothing to get worked up about. If it happens during the ball, you need to learn to handle things more gracefully. Apologize to your partner and make sure she is all right, then continue dancing. You do not want to make it into a scene, understood?” she asked as she urged him with her hands and feet to begin dancing again.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry replied as he began dancing again, his eyes flitting between his feet and his dance partner.

“You know it’s Minerva when we’re in private,” she corrected him warmly.

Harry looked up and smiled at her. “It’s still so weird to call you that.”

“You said Remus Lupin asked you to call him by his first name, did you not?” she inquired.

“Yeah, and even that took me a little while to get used to, but he’s not my professor any more. And I don’t have to switch between Professor and Remus all the time. And besides, he was one of my father’s best friends, just like Sirius. It just seems more natural for our relationship to be less formal,” Harry attempted to explain.

“I understand,” she told him. “Your father and his friends had difficulty making the transition after they graduated and joined the Order. They were older than you at the time, and I was younger. You’ll get used to it in time.”

“I’ll take your word on that,” Harry said with a smile.

With that out of the way, she steered the conversation back to Ron. “Have you and Mr. Weasley worked out your differences?”

“Somewhat,” Harry replied. “We got everything out in the open, but things won’t just go back to normal. Not after everything he’s done.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised to hear you say that. I was rather shocked when I learned that you had been removed from the team. I talked to Mr. Weasley about it, and he claimed that you had refused to show up to practice. I thought the claim was suspect, but as you had not brought the matter to me to be disputed, there was little I could do.”

“I probably should have brought it to your attention,” Harry mused aloud. “I didn’t think of that honestly. The team is Ron’s, so I just decided to accept his decision.”

“Mr. Weasley is the team’s captain because you turned down my offer and suggested him,” McGonagall corrected. “The team belongs to all of Gryffindor House, not just Mr. Weasley. It is his responsibility to do what is best for the team on behalf of the house, and it has become apparent to me that Mr. Weasley is not fit for the job. I talked to your teammates, and based on their comments I feel that you are the ideal candidate for the job. I was wondering if you might reconsider my original offer.”

Harry sighed. "I just don't have the time for it. If all I had to do was show up at practice and make sure everyone kept on task I'd do it. But I don't have time to set up strategies or work out schedules or anything like that."

It was McGonagall's turn to sigh. "If I can convince Mr. Weasley to continue his efforts in that role, would you reconsider?"

"You mean like have us be co-captains?" Harry asked.

"Something like that," she explained. "He would be in charge of devising and teaching new strategies, basically running the practices. You could be in charge of more administrative duties. You would be in charge of the players, talking to them and giving encouragement, giving the pep-talks, and the one in-charge during an actual match."

"I guess I could do that," Harry replied thoughtfully.

"Excellent. I shall arrange a time for the three of us to sit down and talk about it. Afterwards, the two of you can inform the team of the changes," she told him.

That night was another full moon, which was why Harry could be found sneaking out of the castle and into the tunnel underneath the Whomping Willow. Of course, nobody did catch him since he flew straight into the tunnel in owl form, and he had snuck into the owlery under his invisibility cloak.

Remus was waiting for him in the Shrieking Shack when he poked his head up through the trap door. "Hello Harry," the werewolf greeted him with a tired smile as he held a hand out to Harry.

Harry took the offered hand and climbed up into the room. "It's good to see you, Remus," Harry returned.

"And you as well," Remus responded. "So how have you been?"

Harry shrugged. "Pretty good overall."

“Really?” Remus asked. “From what I’ve heard you should be pretty upset.” Harry raised an eyebrow in response. “We heard about Ron and the Quidditch team,” Remus offered by way of explanation as he sank down into a worn, wooden chair. “I should tell you that Molly was none-too-pleased when she heard what Ron had done.”

Harry couldn’t help the smile that the image of an outraged Mrs. Weasley yelling at Ron for what he had done invoked. Remus continued. “She was all set to send him a howler, until Arthur and I managed to convince her that it would probably embarrass you as much as it would Ron. Plus, it wasn’t our argument to settle.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate that and Mrs. Weasley’s intentions as well, though I am certainly glad we avoided the howler. How did you hear about it, anyway?”

“Well,” Remus said with a small smile, “they had to inform Arthur and Molly about Ginny’s fall. When it was explained that you were the one who brought her to safety in the stands, eventually the question of what you were doing in the stands was asked. Needless to say, Molly was quite pleased with you at the time, so when she heard that Ron had kicked you off the team, she was rather...”

“Furious?” Harry offered.

Remus let out a small, weary chuckle. “I think that sums it up quite nicely, yes. So with all of that, care to share how it is you’re doing so well?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve got Ginny,” he said as if that explained everything. “And Neville too. Things are rough with Ron right now, and with Hermione as well, but I’ve been so busy with things that I haven’t had much time to dwell on it. HA is going great. Classes are going extremely well. We’ve got a Hogsmeade weekend coming up...” Harry held his hands out in front of him helplessly. “I don’t know. I guess I do have reasons to be down as well, but I’d rather not be depressed, so I just focus on the more positive things.”

Remus nodded understandingly. "That's good, Harry. Not many people can do that – focus on the good in life – especially amidst everything that's going on right now. I'm glad you can find some measure of happiness despite everything." Harry winced as Remus tensed up suddenly. "I think you better change, Harry," he said after a moment.

A moment later, Harry was replaced by a black panther. He watched in sorrow as his friend went through the slow and painful transformation into a werewolf. Harry spent the rest of the night playing with Remus and keeping him company.

When he was awakened early the next morning, Harry soon bid Remus goodbye and headed back to the castle. Instead of making his way back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry headed to his office. He figured everyone was used to him being gone by the time they woke up, so him sleeping in the morning after every full moon was bound to arouse suspicion, especially if word ever reached Hermione.

So Harry had the bright idea to make use of the rooms in his trunk. He descended into the trunk and immediately made his way into the bedroom, where he collapsed into the bed. He slept until it was almost time for breakfast, leaving him enough time to shower and get dressed before heading down to the Great Hall.

After sitting through a boring DADA lecture and a frustrating Potions class, Harry met with Ginny the period before lunch to work on her animagus training. He told her about his night with Remus and everything the man had revealed about her mum's reactions to everything. They also checked their prank map, which they had hung on the wall next to his broom, to see if Malfoy had triggered anything yet. He had yet to be pranked, but he had begun to trigger some of them as the numerous counters on the map clearly indicated. It was only a matter of time before he triggered one of them enough times for the prank to take effect.

Ginny was progressing relatively quickly in her training, not nearly as fast as Harry had, but she hardly expected to master the transformation in a matter of a couple days. She could consistently change both of her hands individually into paws and was now working

on changing them both at the same time. After that she would begin changing other parts of her body one at a time, then several at once before finally attempting a full transformation. She was getting noticeably excited as her goal was now seemingly within reach.

The next morning Harry received a note from Professor McGonagall asking him to meet her in her office a half an hour before dinner. That evening Harry arrived at Professor McGonagall's office a few minutes early. He rapped lightly on the door, and a moment later the door opened to reveal the professor whom he had been intimidated by for his first five years at Hogwarts. She gave him a warm smile and said, "Come on in, Harry. Have a seat and make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you," Harry replied as he stepped into the office. There were two chairs set up in front of her desk slanted slightly towards each other so their occupants wouldn't need to turn or strain to see each other. He lowered himself into the seat on his left. "Is it safe to assume this is about the Quidditch team?"

"I think that would be a fair assumption," she replied as she sat at her desk. "We're just waiting on Mr. Weasley."

Harry nodded his understanding. As if on cue, Ron knocked on the opened door a moment later. "Come in, Mr. Weasley. And please shut the door behind you." Ron stepped into the room and nudged the door closed with a thud. "Please take a seat." Ron sent Harry a curious glance as he sank into the open chair. "I'm guessing you're curious as to why I called you here," she offered to Ron.

Ron nodded. "Yeah."

"Given recent events, I thought it appropriate to look into how our Quidditch team is doing and how they are being managed. Several things have been brought to my attention that I felt needed to be resolved. The first and most obvious was your dismissal of Mr. Potter from the team," she informed him. There was nothing accusing in her voice, but her displeasure at his decision was obvious.

Ron nodded. "I was wrong for kicking Harry off the team. I've apologized to him for it."

"Be that as it may," McGonagall continued, "your inability to set aside your personal differences for the good of the team is not something we can afford to let happen again. I have spoken to each of the individual members of the team about the events that have transpired over the past several weeks, including how they felt about Mr. Potter's dismissal, how they felt you were handling the captaincy, and how they felt playing under your leadership."

Harry watched Ron Professor McGonagall continued to talk. The boy nodded nervously but did not respond verbally.

"In speaking to each team member, I have learned quite a bit. I learned that the team as a whole was not happy with your decision with regards to Mr. Potter. They had even considered refusing to play for you until you reinstated him. It was only Mr. Potter's own intervention that kept the team from mutiny."

Harry did his best to school his features as Ron's gaze shifted onto him. He tried not to pay him any heed and instead focused his attention solely on Professor McGonagall as she continued.

"In watching the match last Saturday, it's obvious that many members of the team were having troubles. Nathan was noticeably shaken early in the game, leaving Katie and Stephanie at a disadvantage. The timing was off on a lot of their plays, resulting in many mistakes and miscues. Our two beaters did an admiral job in protecting our players, but they struggled even to accomplish that and were unable to put any pressure on the other team. One of the most important duties of the team captain is to lead the team in the match. To give encouragement and direction when it is needed. In all that went wrong during the match, you did not once call a time out or offer up any encouragement or advice to your teammates."

Harry glanced at Ron to find his gaze had sunken to the floor. His face and ears were red with embarrassment, and he was obviously

beginning to see where this meeting was going as his face clearly showed his dejection.

“A captain’s duties also extend outside the field of play. The majority of the team was down after the match despite the victory. With the notable exception of Miss Weasley, they all felt that they had let down their house. It is the captain’s duty to talk to the members of the team to keep their spirits up, to let them know what they did right and give them hope for the future. From the team’s comments it doesn’t appear that you gave any of them any words of encouragement after the match.”

“There is no doubt that you have an extraordinary mind for strategy and game tactics. And your sheer knowledge of the game is quite extensive, but you lack the skills and qualities essential to be a good leader. It has become clear to me in talking with the team that my initial choice for the team’s captain was correct.” She gave Harry a rather pointed look. “I was rather disappointed when Mr. Potter turned down the title last summer, but he has many other duties and responsibilities to attend to this year and has said he has not the time to spend devising game strategies and practice schedules.”

“I talked things over with Mr. Potter earlier this week, and we were able to work out an arrangement that is acceptable to him if you are willing to agree. I want Mr. Potter to have full captaincy of the team. In practices and during game time, he is the one in charge. He will give encouragement and advice, and he will be the one to give the pre-and post-game speeches. He would like you to continue on in your duties as far as devising the game strategies, plays, and formations for the teams. You would likely end up running the majority of most practices, and you would also be responsible for maintaining the schedule and booking the pitch. If you are agreed to these terms, then I will allow you to remain as a co-captain. If you do not agree, then I’m afraid I will have to find a new captain amongst the other team members.”

Harry kept his face forward, though his eyes kept drifting to the redhead beside him. He was looking back and forth between Harry and Professor McGonagall as he attempted to comprehend

everything that was just laid out before him. "So I get to make the plays and run the drills and everything?" he asked. "And Harry has to do all the speech giving and things like that?"

McGonagall nodded. "That's correct."

"And we'll be co-captains?" he asked her.

Another nod. "But Mr. Potter will have final say."

Ron nodded distractedly. He remained silent for another moment as he thought everything over. "I can live with that," he finally said.

The meeting ended shortly thereafter. Ron and Harry stepped out together. Ron seemed as though he wanted to say something to Harry but didn't quite have the words. Harry wanted to check the map in his office before dinner, so he left Ron to make his way up to Gryffindor Tower on his own. As soon as Harry strode into his office, he held his hand over the picture and said, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to some serious pranking."

The map of Hogwarts unfolded before him, and Harry's eyes quickly scanned over the numerous pranks that had been set up throughout the castle. When his eyes roamed over the doors to the Great Hall a great smirk lit up his face. He had to go find Ginny. Not one to waste any time, he held up his hand and said, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good," causing names with little footprints beside them to pop up throughout the map.

He scanned the map for Ginny's name wishing there was some way to just pinpoint her exactly without having to search through the map. He realized that's exactly what the map needed and resolved to look into that when he got a chance. He found her in the Gryffindor Common Room and decided to head up to let her know. They would want to get down to dinner early so as not to miss the show, and there was less than half an hour left until the meal began.

He walked hurriedly up to the seventh floor corridor and made his way to the Fat Lady's portrait. She let him into the room, and his eyes immediately began scanning the room. It was only a second before

they locked onto the long, fiery red hair of his best friend. He strode over to where she was pouring over a textbook at one of the tables. He snuck up behind her and leaned over to whisper in her ear, "Malfoy, Great Hall, dinner time."

He leaned back to watch her reaction. She had startled at first to his unexpected proximity, and she turned towards him. A moment later her face lit up as his words caught up with her. "What time is it?"

"We've got about fifteen minutes 'til it starts," he told her. "I don't know about you, but I want to get there early to get good seats."

She nodded excitedly. "Let me go throw this stuff upstairs and then we can go."

"Alright," he said as she stuffed her books into her bag and rushed up the staircase to her dormitory. Harry leaned against the table and let his gaze wander across the room as he waited. Neville walked into the portrait hole and headed towards him.

"Hey Harry," he greeted.

"Hi Neville," Harry answered back. "How's it going?"

"Pretty good," he replied. "And with you?"

"Not too shabby," Harry replied with a secret smile. "I'm just waiting on Ginny right now, then we're going to head down to the Great Hall for dinner."

"It's still a little early for that, isn't it?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't hurt if we end up a couple minutes early. You're welcome to join us, if you'd like," he offered.

Neville nodded agreeably. "Sounds good to me. I've got nothing else to do. There's no use starting on homework when I'd just have to pack it up in five minutes anyway."

Just then Ginny came bounding back down the stairs and rushed over to them. "Come on," she demanded excitedly eliciting a chuckle from Harry and a raised eyebrow from Neville.

"What's got you so excited?" he asked her.

"A wonderful break from OWL studying," she answered without missing a beat. "The tests are still months away and things are already brutal. I don't know how you guys managed last year, especially with Umbridge and everything."

"It's not so terrible," Harry said. "So long as you keep up with the assignments in class, the tests won't be so bad."

Neville nodded. "I was expecting them to be a lot worse than they were. Not to say they were easy," he amended as they exited out the portrait hole. "But they're made out to be much more terrible than they are."

"Well that's a relief," Ginny proclaimed happily. She was practically skipping in her excitement making both boys laugh.

They were the first students to enter the Great Hall. Ginny led them to the seats closest to the double doors, providing them an excellent view for when Malfoy arrived. They chatted a bit as they waited, both Harry and Ginny getting noticeably excited. Neville was quite amused and rather curious as to what was up, but none of his inquiries met with any answers, so he resigned himself to wait and see what happened.

After a couple minutes students started trickling in and the food appeared on the tables. Neville dug right in. Harry and Ginny made an effort to eat, but they were too distracted to do so with their usual gusto. The hall was about half full when it finally happened.

Malfoy walked through the double doors flanked by both Crabbe and Goyle. As he crossed the threshold, the two thugs stopped in their tracks, mouths hanging wide open in dumb shock. They didn't move, didn't say a thing as they watched Malfoy continue to saunter into the

room, not noticing that he had lost his two lackeys. After getting halfway to his table, Malfoy began to notice that he was receiving quite a bit of attention. This only caused him to smirk to himself and strut his way the rest of the way to the Slytherin table.

Then someone snorted. Another followed. Laughter soon began to break out across the hall just as Draco was reaching the table. He noticed that the members of his house were mostly all staring at him in abject shock. He looked down at himself.

Malfoy's whole body flushed red in embarrassment for the whole hall to see. He felt at his body and his face registered surprised as he felt the fabric of his robes as if nothing was wrong with them. He tried frantically to cover himself for a moment before he realized the futility of the action. He glared at the students across the hall who were all doubled over in laughter, pointing at him. He turned to the double doors and began walking towards them visibly forcing himself to walk at a casual pace.

That was until someone hollered, "Hey Malfoy! Did you know that you blush ALL over?" to a cacophony of laughter from the hall. Malfoy quickened his pace to a sprint at that and slammed his way past Crabbe and Goyle, who were still standing in the entryway trying to figure out what was happening.

Harry and Ginny, still laughing along with the rest of the hall, turned to give each other a proud smile. The first activated prank had been a huge success. They couldn't wait for the rest to take effect.

Chapter 13: Queen of the Jungle

Following the success of their first prank, Harry and Ginny, along with the majority of the school, were in high spirits for the next few days. The pranks on Malfoy and, even better, his reactions to them were the talk of the school.

Harry and Ginny caught themselves rushing to Harry's office several times each day to see which of the pranks would be triggered next. Malfoy had triggered several of the smaller pranks since then. To date his skin had changed colors multiple times, and his hair had been Slytherin green for an afternoon. Harry had wanted to turn it Gryffindor colours, but Ginny had nixed the idea saying it would point suspicion onto their house. Harry could not help but agree with that logic.

There was one other prank that they did not actually get to witness, thankfully, but the map told them it had taken effect. This particular prank had been, in Harry's opinion, a work of evil genius on Ginny's part. Once the prank activated, it would cause Malfoy's underwear to shrink at a gradual pace. He would not notice much at first, but after five or ten minutes, it would become rather restrictive. Given more time, Harry imagined it would grow to be quite painful. The two shared a good laugh over that one.

On Thursday after Transfiguration, operation "Make Malfoy's life Hell" had landed a surprisingly successful blow when Malfoy triggered another one of their pranks. This one caused his robes to rapidly deteriorate until they were more worn and torn than any of the robes found in the second hand shops. It actually would not have been too terrible if Malfoy had not called so much attention to himself. He threw a tantrum the likes of which a two year old would be hard pressed to match in the middle of the Entrance Hall demanding to know who dared to play pranks on him.

In doing so he caused everyone in the hallway to stop and stare at him. When Malfoy stopped screeching, Seamus loudly commented, "You'd think with all his money he could afford some decent robes. Or maybe when they threw his daddy in prison, they took all his wealth away as well."

Malfoy threw a hex at Seamus. The boy was able to block it with his own shield, though it would not have mattered since Harry had thrown a shield in front of him as well. The icing on the cake was the fact that Professor McGonagall had just arrived on the scene to investigate what the commotion was about and gave Malfoy detention for a full week for attacking another student. The incident had many of the students, Harry and Ginny definitely included, in good spirits for the rest of the day.

It was now Friday, the day before the last Hogsmeade trip of the term, and Harry was just entering the Common Room after spending some time in his office reading, when he noticed Ron approaching him somewhat nervously. "Err – could I talk to you for a minute, Harry?"

"Sure, I guess," Harry replied with a shrug. "What's this about?" he asked as they headed towards a deserted corner of the Common Room.

"Well, we didn't get a chance to talk after meeting with McGonagall earlier in the week," Ron started. "I – err – thought we should figure out what we're going to do with the team, how we'll split up duties, and what we'll tell the rest of the team."

Harry sighed. "Honestly, I don't really want to be captain. In the past I might have liked to, but I just have too much other stuff to work on. I don't have the time to think up strategies or plays or anything like that. Besides, you'd be much better with that aspect anyway. You can continue running the team for the most part. If we have any problems with the players, I'll talk to them. And Professor McGonagall wants me in charge during the games. Other than that, you can keep running the show."

"Al – All right," Ron said. "When should we tell the others?"

"Why don't you schedule a meeting for Sunday before dinner? It shouldn't take too long, and it would probably be best to get it done as soon as possible," Harry stated.

“Okay,” Ron said. He opened and closed his mouth a couple times trying to say something before he finally managed, “Thanks, Harry.”

“For what?” Harry asked curiously.

“For letting me stay on as co-captain,” Ron replied sullenly.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t have the time or the drive to do this myself. I only agreed to come on as co-captain because Professor McGonagall didn’t leave me much choice.”

“Err – right, well, I just wanted to say that I’m looking forward to spending time with you. I feel like I’ve been missing my best friend for quite a while.” He paused nervously. “I’ll go spread the word about that meeting then,” Ron said as he headed back to the armchair he had previously been sitting in across from Hermione.

Harry sighed to himself hoping that this would provide an opportunity to begin mending fences. In the meantime, he sought the red hair of his other, favourite Weasley. He spotted her sitting at one of the tables with a book open in front of her. He headed over and sat across from her.

She looked up from her book and smiled in greeting. “Hi Harry.”

“Hey Ginny,” Harry returned. He had been meaning to ask her about her plans for the Hogsmeade trip all week long. Since most students were staying at Hogwarts for the holidays, this would be the only opportunity for them to do their Christmas shopping. As a result, instead of making plans to spend the day together, most friends were all only making plans to meet for lunch to free up time to take care of their shopping.

Harry was of a different mind. Much of his shopping could not be done in Hogsmeade, so he was looking for someone to spend the day with. “Do you have a lot of shopping to do tomorrow?”

“A bit,” she replied.

“Shopping for me?” he inquired further.

She cocked an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Actually I would,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“And why is that?” she asked him. “Trying to get a hint as to what you’re getting for Christmas?”

“No,” he told her honestly. “I’m just wondering if you’d like to go into town with me. I have very little shopping to do tomorrow, none of it for you, and thought it would be nice to hang out with you.”

“I’d love to,” she said. “To be honest, I’m not buying your present tomorrow either. I do have to try to get the rest of my shopping done tomorrow though. So if you don’t mind shopping with me, I’d love your company.”

“Great,” Harry replied. “Do you want to head over right after breakfast then?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

As he lay in bed that night, Harry found it difficult to fall asleep, as he was inexplicably excited about the trip into town the next day. It was nice having a chance to get out of the castle and walk around freely for a day. He was also looking forward to spending the day with Ginny. Sure they spent quite a bit of time together already, but there was always something else going on at the time.

Sometimes they would study together, or rather in each other’s presence since they were in different years and covering different topics. Most of the time they were others around. It was not that Harry minded those others; in fact, he very much enjoyed spending time with all his friends and Ginny’s friends for that matter. But there was something different about Ginny that drew him in, made him want to be with her and only her at times.

Sure, they did have some private time together, but there always seemed to be some agenda involved. Most of the time it was for her animagus training. They had also recently spent a lot of time planning out all Malfoy's pranks. There would be some of that tomorrow as well, he supposed. She had said she needed to get most of her shopping done, and Harry planned to look around for gift ideas as well, but it was different in a way.

For one thing, there would be no need for sneaking around. Most of the time they spent alone together was spent doing something they wanted to keep secret. Sometimes that involved him spilling secrets; the other two prime examples were again the animagus training and Malfoy pranking. Tomorrow would be different. They would be able to relax and talk and just enjoy each other's company. They would shop while they were at it, but Harry was more just looking forward to spending the day walking around the town with Ginny.

He eventually dozed off, and Sirius teased him mercilessly after guessing what had been occupying Harry's mind so much to keep him awake for so long. Harry was able to temper down any reactions he may have had to the teasing, but when his godfather got particularly...creative with his teasing, Harry could not help the slight blush that suffused his cheeks. This spurred Sirius on, but Harry did his best to ignore the man.

He eventually resorted to resuming his training with his godfather to shut the man up. Harry made sure to keep his hexes harmless, but Sirius was not laughing so much after a couple rounds of dueling his godson.

Sirius's nighttime torment did not dim Harry's spirits nor his anticipation in the slightest. He was up bright and early for his morning run. He was gifted with a beautiful view of mist rolling across the lake as the sun began to rise into the clear sky. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day. The days were becoming cooler, but the weather was still somewhat pleasant.

He sped through his workout routine after he finished his jog. Finishing, he took a nice, relaxing shower before dressing and heading down to the Great Hall. He was a bit earlier than usual, but

he was surprised to find that he was not the only one up early this morning as the Great Hall was already beginning to fill with students. Apparently he was not the only one anticipating the visit into town.

He scanned the Gryffindor table for that familiar patch of red hair and was slightly disappointed to find it absent as of yet. He sat down near the middle of the table and began piling the breakfast foods onto his plate. He had only taken a few bites when the seat next to him was filled. "Morning, Harry!"

"Good morning, Ginny," Harry greeted smilingly after he swallowed his bite. He turned toward her and noticed that she was already wide-awake and looked excited to start the day. "You seem rather chipper this morning," he commented dryly.

"Me and the whole castle," she replied lightly with a roll of her eyes.

Harry looked around and found he couldn't argue. "You got me there. I take it you're excited about the trip into town?"

She nodded. "Duh."

"Good," Harry smiled. "Me too."

They did not talk very much throughout the rest of the meal, both content to enjoy their meals in relative quiet. They were finishing up when Ron, Hermione, and Neville came down and sat around them. The three looked eager to get out of the castle and into Hogsmeade as well as they offered their standard greetings and immediately set into their food. Harry and Ginny finished up quickly and bid them goodbye.

"Well, we're off," Harry told them.

"Do you want to meet for lunch?" Hermione asked.

Harry turned to Ginny first, who nodded her consent, before focusing back on Hermione. "Sure, say the Three Broomsticks around noon?"

“Sounds good,” she agreed and the boys nodded their agreement.

Harry spun around to the exit and held his arm out to Ginny. “Shall we, milady?” he asked, giving her a mock bow.

“Lead on, good sir,” she said smilingly as she tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. After a couple steps she squeezed his arm and said, “Let’s invite Luna to lunch.” They changed course for the Ravenclaw table and quickly invited Luna to join them at the pub at noon. With that the two set out. They talked casually on their trek, covering a wide variety of topics from Quidditch and what the meeting would be about the next day to classes to the gorgeous scenery. Harry told her about the view he witnessed every morning during his jogs. She pouted jealously.

Before long they made it into town, and Harry let Ginny take the lead since she had the most shopping to do. He did not technically need to do any shopping today as he planned to do the majority of his shopping in Diagon Alley. Instead, he planned to just keep an eye open for anything that might make a good gift, and he could do that while Ginny got all her shopping done.

She dragged him off to Honeydukes first. They both had similar ideas on what to get Ron. The old saying that the way to a man’s heart was through his stomach might as well have been written about Ron. Together they would be giving him quite a wide variety of sweets that he was sure to love.

They went to several different shops after that and did a fair bit of window-shopping as well. Ginny was continually directing Harry, grabbing his hand and pulling him along, or touching his arm as to get his attention to point out something she saw or a new place she wanted to go, and Harry found himself getting distracted. It was a foreign thing for him to experience.

He supposed it was probably a normal thing for most people, but he was not used to small touches like that. As he was growing up, the Dursleys tended to avoid touching him whenever possible unless it was to smack him or throw him into his cupboard. Normal kids

probably got that kind of small affections from their parents all the time. As he watched her, he did not think she even noticed or paid it any mind.

Hermione acted that way too at times, though she was not nearly as openly friendly and affectionate as Ginny. Hermione was too proper for that. Throughout the early years of their friendship, he often got uncomfortable at the little touches she would give him. But as he thought about it, he found that he was not at all uncomfortable now. He did not know why exactly, but it did not bother him coming from Ginny.

He wondered at that. He had been close to Hermione the past five years, but he never really felt completely comfortable around her. They were too different, and he did not always know how to act with her. She always tried to be so proper, and he could always tell that Hermione was very interested in learning more details about him, particularly his life before Hogwarts, but he had always refrained from sharing anything with her or anyone else for that matter. It just did not feel right. He felt uncomfortable just at the thought.

But Ginny was different. He had already shared with her more about his time with the Dursleys than anyone else, and for some reason he had not been particularly nervous or uncomfortable about it at the time. He remembered commenting about his years spent in the cupboard under the stairs without really giving it a second thought until after he had said it. He had been shocked at his own candidness, but he couldn't bring himself to regret it. It was nice to talk about it, to talk to her about it.

He supposed it was probably because Ginny and he were just more alike than he ever was with Hermione. They shared a lot of the same interests, and for whatever reason he was just comfortable with Ginny. He did not feel the need to be so quiet and reserved around her, to hide things. In fact, he often found himself wanting to tell her more, and he had to stop himself at times. She already knew more than was safe for either of them. He knew he would eventually have to come up with a solution to that, some way to protect her and what she knew about him, but that time was not now.

He shifted his attention back to his surroundings as Ginny pulled him into another store, Dervish and Banges. The store held an eclectic variety of items. In fact, you never knew what you were going to find there. Ginny shot him a couple surreptitious glances, and he figured she had noticed his earlier introspection and did not know quite what to make of it. He smiled at her reassuringly and resumed his search of the shop's shelves for something of value.

Ginny was the first to spot something. It was a necklace in a small display case. It looked like pearls, but Harry suspected they were not real based on the price. The necklace was not terribly expensive to begin with based on the card which had several previous prices crossed off before listing the current price, which looked like quite a steal. A small card explained that the necklace had some magical properties and to inquire at the desk about them, so Ginny did just that, and Harry followed, curious.

The store clerk told them that this type of necklace was popular many years back. It served as a warning of sorts. When someone you loved was in imminent danger, it would vibrate to alert the wearer that something was wrong. The necklaces fell out of favour after the family clocks were introduced. The clocks were far more accurate than the necklace, listing the status of each individual family member, while the necklace did nothing more than tell its wearer that something was wrong with someone they loved. All it inevitably caused was worry since there was not always a way to find out what exactly was wrong.

On the bright side, when everyone was safe, it warmed slightly, and the wearer of the necklace was often infused with a warm, calming, reassuring feeling, knowing that their loved ones were alright. Ginny considered it for a long moment, and Harry remembered back to a conversation they had shared about Mrs. Weasley a little while back. The Weasley matriarch was worried all the time with the war escalating, and over the summer she had even taken to carrying the clock around with her if she was going to be out of the kitchen for an extended period of time. He knew that Ginny was thinking this would provide her some comfort and eliminate the need to lug the clock around all the time. He also suspected that her only hesitation was the price. While not particularly expensive, it was not dirt-cheap either,

and Harry knew that she was rather tight for money this year after purchasing her dress robes.

At length, Ginny let out a deep sigh and turned back to the proprietor. "It's lovely, but I don't think I'll quite be able to afford it."

Harry, meanwhile, had surreptitiously dug a galleon out of his money pouch. He held it up behind her back for the clerk to see and held a finger to his lips as he gestured towards Ginny. The man bowed his head a fraction in acknowledgement and turned to Ginny. "Well perhaps we can work something out," he offered. "Why don't you look around the shop some more, and if you find a couple other items you like, I may be able to drop the price down a bit for you. How does that sound?"

"That sounds brilliant," she said quickly. "Thank you."

As she set off back into the aisles to look for more items she could buy for people, Harry stepped up to the counter and slid the galleon towards the man. He whispered, "Thank you for that. Charge her the difference, and she should be able to afford it just fine. I'm sure she'll find something else to make that deal of yours sound legitimate."

"No, thank you," the man said smilingly. "And might I just say that it's a very nice thing you're doing for her."

Harry shrugged, mumbled a thank you, and moved to catch up with Ginny. She ended up finding a few knick-knacks to give to her roommates. They were just about ready to call off their search through the shop when something caught Harry's eye. It looked like an ordinary child's doll, but Harry could have sworn that he saw its hair colour change just a moment before. He lifted the female doll up and noticed a card underneath it that explained what the doll was: a metamorphmagus doll. The face shape, body structure, and hair colour all changed at random, creating quite a mix of appearances for the doll. Best of all was the shirt the female doll was wearing. It was black with a very prominent pink heart in the chest. He really hoped that Remus would be opening his presents with Tonks.

Ginny turned around when she realized that he had stopped and raised an eyebrow at him at his selection. "What could you possibly want with that?"

"It's not for me," Harry said as he rolled his eyes. "It's a gift."

"For whom?" she inquired.

A wide smile spread across Harry's face. "Remus."

"Remus?" she mouthed in confusion. She looked at the doll again, and Harry watched as recognition dawned on her face. "He likes Tonks?" she asked.

Harry's eyes twinkled. "She likes him too, as far as I can tell. But I don't think either has done anything about it yet. Maybe this will help give him a hint to get a move on."

Ginny giggled at the thought. "I never knew you had such a wicked streak in you, Harry."

"I just need the proper motivation," Harry joked. "And teasing Remus is definitely a proper motivator. You should have seen him over the summer when I first confronted him about it. I got him so tongue tied he didn't know what he was admitting to."

"What do you mean?" she asked eagerly, her attention entirely riveted on him.

"Well it was on my birthday, and I managed to trick him into saying that he knew quite well what to do with his feelings for Tonks," Harry impishly explained. "Though given the lack of development there, I'd say he was just blowing smoke."

"How did you manage to get him to say that?"

"Now, now...can't give away all my secrets," Harry teased.

They went back up to the counter, and as promised, the man took a galleon off the price, leaving it at less than half of what he was originally asking. Ginny's eyes bulged at that, not expecting such a large discount, and she quickly paid for everything with an exuberant, "Thank you!"

Harry paid for the doll afterwards and thanked the man yet again before the two left the shop. It was nearing noon, so they decided to head towards the pub. They arrived in short order, and Harry opened the door for Ginny and followed her inside. They scanned the semi-crowded pub for signs of their friends, but it appeared that they were the first of the group to arrive. Madame Rosmerta was currently busy with another table, so they helped themselves to a table along the sidewall and sat next to each other as they waited.

Madame Rosmerta strolled up to the table a moment later with a warm smile on her face. "Harry Potter," she greeted cheerfully. "It's good to see you again. And you as well, Ginny," she added.

"Good to see you as well, Rosie," Harry replied in kind. Ginny just nodded her greeting.

"What can I get you dears?" the barmaid asked.

"Two butterbeers," he said half-questioningly with a glance at Ginny. She nodded, so he turned to Rosie and repeated, "Two butterbeers."

"Coming right up," she called out as she moved on, swaying her hips provocatively as she made her way back to the bar.

Harry chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Ginny asked him.

"Just Madame Rosmerta," Harry told her. "Only she could get away with flirting with guys well less than half her age, and minors to boot."

"It is a bit odd," she said thoughtfully.

Harry shrugged. "It's how she makes her money." Ginny quirked an eyebrow in question. "Well for one thing, it keeps guys coming back to the bar," Harry answered the unspoken question. "Every guy who comes into Hogsmeade wants to stop by the Three Broomsticks for a drink and to see her. Not only that, but that's also how she earns her tips. Believe me, as attractive as she is, most guys are eager to lay down a handsome tip after she's been buttering up to them for their entire visit."

"I hadn't thought of it like that before," Ginny commented thoughtfully. "But it makes sense. So does that include you then?" she asked impishly.

Harry shrugged. "I'd tip her the same if she was ugly as a troll. She's good at what she does and extremely friendly. That's all that really matters to me. The fact that she's easy on the eyes is just an added bonus." After a moment he added, "A very nice bonus." That earned him a playful smack on the arm.

"You're terrible," Ginny said. "She's as old as my mum, at least."

"She's aged well," Harry commented off-handedly.

"And you're saying my mum hasn't?" Ginny inquired.

"Now you're putting words into my mouth," Harry answered back easily. "You know I didn't mean to imply that at all."

Just then Neville strode up to the table, arms laden with bags. "Hey you two," he greeted.

"Hey Neville," they chorused.

"How's your shopping going?" Ginny asked him.

"Not terribly," he replied as he took the seat next to Harry. "It's tiring, but I'm almost done. Just a couple people left to shop for. What about you two? Did you come into town together?"

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Neither of us was planning to shop for the other today, so we decided to do our shopping together. It’s going alright I guess.”

Ginny nodded in agreement. “I’m getting there as well. Slowly but surely.”

Hermione, Luna, and Ron each joined them in turn. Madame Rosmerta smilingly strolled up to their table to take their orders. She circled the table as she took down their selections. Harry and Ginny shared secretive smiles as they both noticed the extra attention she paid to the guys, touching their arms or shoulders slightly flirtatiously. Reminded of his earlier thoughts on similar contact he was receiving from Ginny, Harry’s smile at her took on a somewhat double meaning of which only he was aware.

Rosmerta left for a moment, returning shortly thereafter with drinks for everyone else. An easy conversation passed among the six friends as they sat nursing their butterbeers. Their talk seemed to focus on the upcoming holidays. All the Christmas shopping everyone was doing was no doubt putting everyone in the holiday spirit.

The conversation continued on even after the food was served, shifting to their families and what they would be doing to celebrate. Hermione’s parents were planning a trip to the U.S., New York City to be exact. Hermione was a little jealous and wished she could be accompanying them, but she was also quite excited about spending the holidays at Hogwarts and was very much looking forward to the Yule Ball.

Neville admitted that he had absolutely no regrets over staying at Hogwarts for the duration of the holidays. His Gran apparently always dragged him around to “high society” parties where there were only a couple people his age around and none he got along with. He told them that they sometimes attended the same functions as the Malfoys and that the other kids his age were of that ilk. Harry could certainly understand Neville’s joy in getting to skip those parties this year.

Ron and Ginny were torn about staying at Hogwarts for the holidays. They both missed their family and would have liked the opportunity to visit with them, but at the same time, they were excited for the chance to hang out at school without lessons, homework, or exams looming over them taking up all their time. The Yule Ball was an added bonus.

Luna remarked that she would be missing out on an expedition her father was taking to the Netherlands to search for a pack of Plungies, which supposedly inhabited the swamplands in the area. The others could empathize on the time she was missing with her father; as for the hunt for Plungies... they preferred to ignore that part.

As soon as she finished her explanation, she turned to Harry expectantly. When Harry did not immediately speak up, she asked, "What about your family Harry?"

Harry noticed Ron and Hermione share a dark look that they tried to keep inconspicuous but failed miserably. Neville gave him a small half-smile in commiseration, while Ginny reached under the table and, taking his hand, gave it a small squeeze. Harry turned to give Ginny a small smile before turning back to the table at large.

"Well, I imagine the Dursleys will decorate the outside of the house and windows up nice for the neighbours' benefit, but the interior will remain mostly the same. They'll go to services on Christmas and act as though they're the most pious Christians on Earth when they haven't been to a mass since Easter. They'll dote on Dudley and buy him a wealth of presents. Dudley will spend most of Christmas day opening and testing out his gifts, and then he'll no doubt sneak off with his gang to terrorize the kids in the neighbourhood. My aunt and uncle will pointedly ignore it and accept his declarations of having tea at a friend's house as fact. I think that about sums up their typical holidays," Harry told the table at large but focusing most of his attention on Luna, though he would swear he had heard Ginny growl very softly.

She nodded, content with his answer, and Ginny tactfully shifted the topic away from families. "So did anyone else see Malfoy today?" She had not in fact seen Malfoy as of yet, but she and Harry had set up a

prank to hit him as he walked through the gates at the end of Hogwarts' grounds. There was no way for him to avoid it.

"No, what happened to him this time?" Ron asked eagerly.

"You won't believe it," Harry supplied. "He sprouted white fur all over his body: his face, arms and hands, everywhere the eye could see. Reminded me of his ferret days."

This brought about a cacophony of laughter from the table at large, especially the two Weasleys. Even Hermione could not hold back her snort of laughter, though she sobered up long before any of the others.

"I'd like to know who's behind it all," Hermione said once the rest began to settle down.

"You and me both," Harry agreed enthusiastically. "I'd like to shake their hands."

"As would the majority of the castle," Neville added for good measure. "I have to say my favourite so far would have to be the first, when Malfoy's robes disappeared in the Great Hall. I sure am glad I had such good seats for that one," he said, shooting a significant look towards Harry and Ginny.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a quick look as Hermione continued as if the others had not spoken, "They've been using some really advanced magic. All their spells have obviously been designed to specifically target Malfoy. That requires a rather thorough grasp of some branches of magic not even covered at Hogwarts, meaning a lot of outside research. I'd like to be able to ask how they managed it," she said wonderingly. "Not that I condone what they're doing," she quickly amended herself. "But it is rather fascinating."

Harry, Ginny, and Neville all laughed at Hermione's confession while Ron stared at her, dumbfounded. "Fascinating?" he asked her incredulously. "Bloody brilliant is more like it."

“Ronald, language,” she corrected automatically.

They had all finished their meals by now, but they remained in the pub for another half hour at least, chatting easily amongst themselves. They finally decided to separate again, everyone splitting up to resume their shopping. Harry and Ginny were the only exception as they set off together. Ginny led Harry by the arm down the street to continue their window-shopping. After a short while, Harry found his attention wandering away from the store windows. He was quickly losing interest in shopping. Instead, as Ginny would stop and peer into windows, Harry observed the people in the streets.

Students were walking every which way across the street. Some were going into shops, others leaving. Some seemed to be mostly window-shopping, as Ginny and he were, while others were going into seemingly every shop they passed. But students were not the only ones in the streets. There were also some adults interspersed among the younger generation. And it was these adults that began to draw Harry’s attention, though he tried not to show it.

These adults were paying an abnormal amount of attention to the two of them. His first inclination was to ignore them as people often stared at Harry, but something did not seem quite right here. Normally people were rather unabashed in the attention they paid to him. Even when Harry caught them staring, the average witch or wizard would continue to stare and talk and sometimes even point as if they felt absolutely no shame in it. It was like they felt it was their right or privilege to treat him as if he was property of the public domain.

These adults were acting differently though. They were paying attention to him but were trying to hide the fact. Any time he turned towards one, the adult would suddenly turn away or pretend to be looking in a store window or reading from some map or booklet. It was all a little too suspicious for his liking, and he began thinking over how he wanted to handle the situation when Ginny dragged him inside a store.

It was Gladrags. There was a pair of hideously bright colored jackets in the window that were practically being given away. Ginny insisted they would be perfect for Fred and George. Given the twins’ tastes,

Harry could not disagree, although the thought of having to actually see those jackets again was enough to deter him from even considering buying them for the twins. Ginny did not seem to have any such qualms.

After she pulled the two jackets off the display in the window, she began browsing through some t-shirts with various sayings on them. While Ginny was inspecting all the racks of clothing, Harry was evaluating their situation. There were at least three unknown witches and wizards, possibly Death Eaters, following them. He did not expect to have much trouble actually dealing with them on his own. The streets, however, were crowded, and one of his biggest advantages in a fight was his ability to dodge. He did not want a stray curse hurting or possibly killing an innocent bystander. He needed to lure these strangers away from the crowds before he could confront them, and he had to do this without tipping them off that he was onto them.

Finally deciding on his plan of action, he sidled up to Ginny and whispered. "Ginny, don't react to what I'm about to tell you, but I think we might have some Death Eaters following us around town." Ginny stiffened slightly. "There are a few people trying to follow us discreetly. They shouldn't be a problem for me, but I can't fight them in all these crowds. I need you to continue shopping and acting like nothing is wrong. When we leave the store, start dragging me off to a less populated area, but don't make it look obvious. Stop and look in store windows like you have been, but don't linger too long. I want to lure them out of the crowded areas before a confrontation breaks out. We can't let them know we're onto them until we're already away from the crowds, alright?"

She nodded. "Alright, Harry."

"Good," he replied. "Go ahead and finish your shopping."

She continued looking through the racks for another few minutes before pulling a couple shirts which she explained were for Bill and Charlie. Harry couldn't help but smile at her selections. One of the shirts said on the front, "I like my women fiery." On the back was a dragon breathing fire; underneath that was the word, "Literally." The

other read: "I like to practice my wand movements in bed." Harry couldn't believe she was actually going to buy that one.

She quickly paid for the clothes, and a couple minutes later, she was leading Harry out the door by the arm. True to her word, Ginny acted like nothing had changed. She continued to pull Harry along from store window to store window, looking interestedly at all the bric-a-brac on display. Harry half paid attention to the stores and discretely devoted half his attention to keeping track of their stalkers.

After about five minutes they reached the end of the shopping district, and the crowds of people had severely thinned out. There were only a handful of other people in the streets. Harry turned to Ginny and loudly said, "It looks like we've hit the end. I think there's a shortcut back to the main area through this alley here."

"Alright," she replied easily.

Harry linked his arm with hers and set them off at a leisurely pace. He wanted to give the attackers time to react. He had no doubt that they would attempt an ambush from both ends of the alley, and he was counting on just that.

He turned towards Ginny and said in a whisper, "They'll likely ambush us from both sides. Keep alert. If they don't attack right away, I'm going to try to taunt them into sending the first spell. When they do, wait until the last second, then drop to the ground. If we're lucky, they'll knock each other out. As we drop, you send a spell forward, and I'll send one behind us. Hopefully that will take care of them. If we're still surrounded after that, try to stay back to back. If you spot any Unforgivables, get out of the way and yell 'Dive.' I'll do the same."

She nodded her understanding.

When they were about halfway through the alley, two figures stepped into the entrance in front of them. Harry looked behind him and spotted two more at the other end. He tugged on Ginny's arm signaling her to stop walking, and the two pairs moved in closer until each was only a few meters away.

“Not too smart wandering into an alley these days,” one of the men in front of them commented. “You never know who you might run into.”

“We’re just passing through,” Harry replied shortly.

“Not bloody likely,” a deep voice intoned from behind them.

“And just who is going to stop me?” Harry inquired. “You?” he asked with a snort.

“I’d watch my tongue if I were you,” a female voice warned from behind them. Harry turned around to face her.

“I’m not too worried,” Harry stated boldly, meeting her eyes. “You guys aren’t even Death Eaters. What’s the matter? Did old Voldie reject your applications? Do you think bringing down the big, bad Harry Potter is going to garner you some respect? Maybe then they’ll let you join up and lick their boots clean.”

This had the desired affect. “Why you little,” the woman screeched while they all whipped out their wands and cast their spells. Harry waited half a second before flicking his wrist to draw his wand as he dropped to the ground. The spells passed harmlessly over his head, and he cast two quick stunners towards the two who had approached from behind them. The man was hit with a cutting curse sent by one of his friends. Harry’s stunner also connected, and the man flew back a few meters and landed on his back unconscious. The woman was able to erect a shield in time and blocked Harry’s stunner. She was apparently not in the line of fire of the other curses.

Not wasting any time, Harry drew up his power and sent a strong everbero towards her. It cleaved her shield and sent her careening into the wall. She slammed into the bricks hard and dropped to the ground. Harry turned around to find out how Ginny was faring. He found one of the men unconscious. The other was clawing at his face trying to wipe off the winged bogies that were ravaging him.

Harry chuckled. “So that’s your infamous bat-bogey hex.”

Ginny turned to him with a smirk. "Yep. You like it?"

"It's certainly effective," Harry mused aloud. "But in a real fight I prefer to knock my opponents out rather than only temporarily incapacitating them; however, I'm sure it can be quite useful in other situations where the threat is not as imminent."

Ginny shrugged in response. "To each his own."

Harry smiled his agreement before turning his attention to their four fallen opponents. "Well, what do you think we should do with these guys?" he asked her.

"Beats me," Ginny replied. "Do you really think that they're not Death Eaters? Or were you just goading them into attacking?"

"Only one way to find out," He said as he approached one of the unconscious bodies and lifted up the left sleeve. "No dark mark." He checked the other three as well. None of them had a dark mark.

"This did seem a bit too easy. Well let's tie them up and head back into town. Maybe we'll find an auror or a professor or something," Harry suggested.

Ginny nodded agreeably, and the two quickly had their four captives bound with magical ropes. Harry picked up one of their attacker's wands and walked down to one entrance and cast a spell with it. "What was that?" Ginny asked.

"Notice-me-not charm," Harry explained. "We don't want anyone else stumbling upon them before we find someone to take care of them."

"Why didn't you just use your own wand?" she inquired as they turned to walk towards the other entrance.

"I don't want it traced back to me. That's not a charm I learned at Hogwarts. If they attempt to track where the spell came from, it'll

come back to this wand. They won't know that I was the one using the wand at the time and will assume it was setup by our attackers."

"How utterly devious of you. You're getting rather good at this," Ginny teased.

"What can I say? It's the Slytherin in me," Harry joked. He raised the wand to cast the spell on the other entrance when two more figured jumped out at them. Harry instinctively reached for Ginny and pulled her behind him as he threw up a shield. Ginny ducked around Harry's side to cast two quick spells which both connected with their targets. Harry looked at her victims, both having fallen prey to the bat-bogey hex, then turned back to Ginny with a smile.

"Some might say you have a rather unhealthy obsession with that particular hex," Harry commented.

"They'd probably be right," she replied unabashedly.

Harry quickly stunned the two, which prompted Ginny to whinge, "You're no fun." Harry shrugged at her as he sent the two unconscious men over to lie next to their comrades. He turned back and finished casting the notice-me-not charm on that entrance. Afterwards, he summoned the other five wands to himself and stuffed them in his pocket.

He once again held out his arm for her to take and asked, "Shall we?" She nodded smilingly and slipped her arm through his. The two set off towards the main town keeping an eye open for any professors or Order members they could inform about what happened.

Neither had any more shopping to do, and, as they both figured that they would be directed back to the castle right away anyway, they set their course for the path to Hogwarts. As they were walking, Ginny squeezed his arm gently to gain his attention. "Hm?" he asked, looking down his right shoulder to meet her eyes.

"I just wanted to say thanks," she said.

“What for?” Harry asked, baffled.

“For not acting like I’m a helpless little girl. For trusting me to be able to handle myself,” she told him earnestly.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about you or didn’t want to keep you out of those types of situations,” Harry admitted. “But I know you’re quite capable of handling it. Besides, it would be a bit hypocritical of me to tell you that you had to remain behind and stay safe while I went out to face the big bad danger, since that’s exactly what I’ve been fighting against with Dumbledore and the Order. This is our war too, and I know that extends beyond me to you and to the others.”

“Yeah, well that makes one of you,” Ginny muttered derisively. “You should have heard Mum, Bill, and Charlie last June after...” she trailed off slightly.

“After the Department of Mysteries,” Harry supplied easily enough.

“Right,” she agreed. “They treat me as if I’m still six years old and incapable of looking after myself let alone being of any help in a fight.”

“Well I know quite well how good you are in a fight,” Harry said. “Not only do I see you in action in my HA classes, but I got to see you last June and just now. You’re quick, both in your spell casting and in your movements. And you pack quite a bit of power for such a small package,” he teased, earning him a playful slap on the arm. But she was smiling widely at his praise.

They didn’t find anyone of help until they came to Hogwarts’ gates where Professor McGonagall was standing watch. They strode up to her. “Professor McGonagall,” Harry greeted.

“Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley,” she returned the greeting with a nod at each.

“Hello Professor,” Ginny said.

“What can I do for you two?” she asked in her no-nonsense tone of voice.

“Well, we had a bit of an incident in town we thought you should be aware of,” Harry explained.

“An incident?” she asked.

“Yes, there were six adults who cornered us in an alley at the end of the shopping district.” Harry gave her a brief summary of their short fight. “We stunned them all and tied them up, but we didn’t know what else to do with them. We checked them all, and none of them had the dark mark. They were pretty easy to defeat as well, so I highly doubt this was related to Voldemort or the Death Eaters in any way. In all likelihood, they were probably hoping that bringing me in would earn them a free ticket into Voldemort’s inner circle.”

McGonagall pursed her lips so tightly that they appeared as mere slits on her face. “Where exactly did you leave them?”

Harry listed off the two buildings they were in between at the time. “Very well. I want the two of you to head straight back to the castle. Don’t talk about what happened with anyone. If what you’ve said is true and this was not connected to You-Know-Who, then news of the attack would only cause unnecessary panic. I will insure that the matter is dealt with.”

The two nodded and turned to walk away when she stopped them. “Oh, and one other thing.” They turned back and looked at her expectantly. “It’s good to see that you two were able to handle the situation so well. Twenty points to Gryffindor for each of you.”

“Thanks,” they both replied. They turned back and finished their trek back to the castle.

OoOoO

The next day, Harry and Ron met a few minutes early to get the room set up for their Quidditch meeting. As it was pointless to use the changing rooms at the pitch since they were not actually practicing, they wanted the meeting to be private, so they decided to hold it in the Room of Requirement. Since they were all used to treating Ron as their captain, they decided it would be best if he introduced the idea to them. Soon enough, the team members began appearing. Once everyone arrived and settled in, Ron began.

“I want to thank you all for coming,” Ron stated nervously as he paced in front of them. The room had provided them with a cosy sitting room with three sofas and four armchairs. Harry was standing in front of them but off to the side a little, leaning up against one of the unoccupied chairs. Ron was right in the center of the group, walking back and forth in front of a small fire.

“As I’m sure you all agree, I made a big mess of things with the team,” Ron said at length, stopping his pacing. “I blew things way out of proportion and let my personal issues get in the way of my duties as your captain. Harry and I met with Professor McGonagall, and we came to a decision that we all thought would be best for the team as a whole. Harry was her first choice for the captain and the best man for the job, but he turned down the offer because he didn’t have enough time for it. So we came up with a compromise.” He turned to Harry, “Do you want to explain it?”

“Sure,” Harry said, stepping forward. “Basically, Ron and I will be co-captains. I’ll technically be the one in charge, but Ron will continue to run practices and come up with our plays and strategies. I will only step in if I see a need. I also get the honor of giving speeches and pep-talks and things of the like,” Harry said sarcastically. “I’ll also be the one in charge come game time.”

He looked directly at each of his teammates in turn to gauge their reactions. Each and every one of them wore a bright smile on their faces. Ginny also winked at him slyly, to which he rolled his eyes in response. “Does anybody have any questions?” he asked.

“I do,” Katie said. Harry nodded at her to continue. “Let’s say one of us has a problem or an issue or something we feel needs to be brought up, who should we talk to?”

“A good question,” Harry said as he thought over his response. “I would say it depends on the nature of whatever it is you’re bringing up. If it relates directly to the way practice is run or to any of our plays or strategies, bring it to Ron. Otherwise, bring it to me. If you have any doubts, you can come talk to me about it, and if I feel it’s something that Ron should be answering, I’ll get him involved. Does that sound good to you, Ron?”

He nodded. “Yeah, sounds perfect.”

“Great,” Harry said. “Any more questions?” Nobody spoke up. “Alright, then you’re free to go. Thanks again for coming.”

Everyone rose from their seats, but nobody headed towards the door. Instead, they all gave Harry a congratulatory handshake, Katie and Ginny being the only exceptions. They gave him hugs instead. Harry thought Stephanie was going to offer him a hug as well, but at the last second she stuck her hand out and blushed brilliantly. He gave her what he hoped was a warm, comforting smile. When he looked up he saw Ginny shoving a fist in her mouth to stifle her giggles. He tried to give her a stern look, but he could not quite manage it. It really was funny.

The next day brought about yet another of Harry’s dancing lessons with Professor McGonagall. Not wasting any time, she immediately told him what had happened with the six adults who had attacked him, confirming his initial thoughts that the attack was in no way related to Voldemort. With that business out of the way, she started the music with a flick of her wand, and they began dancing. They talked about many things as they danced: his classes, his friends, Quidditch, his status as an Assistant Professor. On this occasion, Harry brought something up that he had been wondering about for almost the entire term.

“Pro – Minerva, what do you think about my being an Assistant Professor?” Harry asked her.

“To be honest I had some reservations about it at first,” she told him candidly. “You haven’t always been the best or most motivated student, and you do have a tendency to ignore school rules when they don’t suit you. But you do always have good intentions at heart when you break the rules, so I can’t fault you entirely. Sometimes it’s necessary to break a couple rules in order to do the right thing, especially when you have somebody like Fudge sitting in office making the laws.”

Harry nodded his understanding, so she continued. “I never got to see you teach the DA last year. I don’t think any of us did, except perhaps the Headmaster, but he won’t confirm my suspicions. But the evidence spoke for itself. Everybody in the DA who took a NEWT or an OWL exam outscored the vast majority of their classmates in DADA. It was obvious that you were doing something right in those meetings.”

“But I could have conducted the HA this year as just a student still,” Harry commented.

“That’s true. And that was discussed heavily in our meetings before the term began. Albus was persuasive in his arguments for you to be given the title. He talked about the fact that you wanted to open up the club to all houses, and he felt that you would need a position of authority to maintain control of your classes. The last thing we wanted was for some unruly students to disrupt your lessons without you being able to do anything to stop them, save for hexing them. And we didn’t want that,” she said with a little laugh.

“So you wanted to make sure that nobody else had the same authority I did in class,” Harry inserted. “Thus I couldn’t be made a prefect or anything like that because then some of the students would still be on equal footing with me.”

“Exactly,” Minerva agreed. “Your classes are important in teaching the students the skills they will need to survive. We didn’t want

anything disrupting that.” She paused for a long moment before asking, “Why did you want to know?”

Harry thought over his response for a moment before answering. “I’ve been thinking about it for a little while, actually. I just found it odd that nobody has really spoken to me about it at all. I haven’t been included in any staff meetings or anything like that. I’ve basically just been treated as a regular student by the rest of the faculty. I didn’t expect to be included in the regular staff meetings or anything, but I had assumed that I’d at least receive updates or some feedback or something. It just seems odd to give me this position, then to leave me on my own.”

She regarded him for a long moment trying to think up a response to that. “You make an excellent point,” she finally conceded. “It was an oversight on our part to leave you to your own devices without ever officially checking up on you. Albus encouraged us all to look in on one of your classes to see what it was like, but he never requested that we discuss our findings with you. I remained after the lesson I visited because I wanted to talk over your performance with you, not because I was required to.”

“And I’ve only had two other visitors besides you. Professor Flitwick came to one of the advanced classes as did Professor Snape,” Harry commented. “He actually tried to sneak in under an invisibility cloak to watch my class unnoticed.”

“Tried?” she inquired with a smile tugging at her lips.

Harry nodded. “Yes. I set up that contract to show me anybody in my presence who had not signed it. It sees through polyjuice potion and invisibility cloaks. It makes the uninvited guest glow red, so when I saw a red glow in a corner of the room with no person attached, I summoned his invisibility cloak away from him.”

She let out a loud laugh at that, which sounded strange to Harry’s ears. He had never heard her really laugh out loud, unrestrained, before. “Oh I would have loved to see his face when you did that,” she finally managed to say.

“Yeah,” Harry mused reminiscently. “He wasn’t too happy about it.”

“I would imagine not,” she interjected.

Harry smiled back at her. “He did make one suggestion during class, which actually ended up being helpful. But after that, he didn’t speak a word to me. He left as soon as the lesson ended.”

“That sounds like Severus,” Minerva chuckled, “always trying to be sneaky. He was probably just upset that he was caught by a student, and a Potter at that.”

Harry laughed. “That must have been the ultimate insult to him with how incompetent he claims me to be.”

“Indeed,” she replied. “Tell you what, Harry. Starting next term, why don’t we meet once every month to go over anything important that you might need to know as a member of the staff, and you can bring up any questions or concerns that you might have at that time as well.”

“That sounds great, Minerva,” Harry said with a smile.

Harry was happy to note after the lesson that throughout their entire conversation, as involved as it was, he never once stepped on her toes. At the end of the lesson they decided to stop meeting since Harry was at a point where he could dance well while holding a conversation, and she was getting much busier with the end of term rapidly approaching. Though Harry did not quit his lessons entirely, he just changed the location to the Room of Requirement.

He was actually surprised with himself that he hadn’t thought to use the room earlier. It was the first place he went when he needed dueling training, so why not go there for dance training as well? He was glad for his lessons with his Head of House, though. First of all, he needed to know the basics before he would have been able to accomplish much in the Room of Requirement. Secondly, he felt like he had made a connection with his professor. They were no longer

just student and professor but also colleagues, even friends, though only in private.

Malfoy was hit with another couple small pranks in the days that followed. One of which painted a pink heart on the back of Malfoy's robes. Inside the heart in a fancy script was written "Draco Malfoy + Severus Snape." That one had most of the school laughing behind Malfoy's back for an entire day. Snape was furious when Malfoy strode into his class in the robes and after unsuccessfully trying to remove the charm, sent Malfoy to the Slytherin dorms to change.

Malfoy was becoming noticeably harried as a result of the constant yet seemingly random prankings. He was jumpy and twitchy, unable to sit still and always looking over his shoulder. On Wednesday Harry and Ginny had contracted Dobby to serve him some of Fred and George's more special treats. At lunch he turned into a canary for a short while, and at dinner his tongue swelled to enormous proportions before one of his housemates had the decency to help him.

All this culminated in their afternoon meal on Thursday. Malfoy triggered one of their more subtle pranks, and neither Harry nor Ginny could have been happier with the results. While trying to enjoy his lunch, Malfoy caught his reflection in his goblet, and the sight caused him to yelp in shock and drop the goblet in his lap, drenching himself in pumpkin juice. But it did not stop there.

Malfoy stormed up to the Head Table directly in front of Snape, stomping his foot in frustration as he demanded, "This has gone too far. Look at what they've done to me! I demand that you find who's doing this to me and have them expelled immediately!"

Snape fixed him with a level glare. "Is something the matter, Mr. Malfoy?" he asked in annoyance.

Malfoy spluttered for a few moments. "Something the matter?" he asked incredulously. "Something the matter?" he screamed hysterically. "Look at me! Look what they've done to my face!" He pawed at his face for emphasis. "There could be permanent damage done."

Snape looked closely at the boy in front of him, leaning over the Head Table to get a better look. "I see nothing out of the ordinary."

Malfoy froze in his tracks staring unbelievably at the man. "Nothing out of the ordinary?" he shrieked. "How dare you? Do you propose that I always look this way?" he asked, gesturing at his face once again.

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape said impatiently. "I suggest you drop whatever act you're trying to put on and return to your seat immediately."

Malfoy turned his head both directions, looking to the other professors for help. Surely one of them would step forward and help him. Their heads were nodding in agreement with Snape's words. He turned cold eyes back to his Head of House. "When my father hears of this..."

"Need I remind you," Snape interrupted, "that your father is an escaped convict. If you have any information on his current whereabouts, I highly suggest you contact the proper authorities," Snape said pointedly.

Apparently the message was able to sink in through the boy's hysteria for he did not proceed with his threat. He stood stock still for moment, staring at Snape, before turning on his heel and storming out of the hall. By that point, the entire hall was fighting to control their laughter. It was a useless effort. By the time Malfoy had made it halfway to the exit, the walls were echoing with the laughter of the students who had just witnessed Draco Malfoy in a full blown tantrum over what they saw as nothing.

Only Harry and Ginny knew what had spurred Malfoy to react in such a way. To everyone else in the world, Malfoy would appear perfectly normal. But to Draco, when he saw or touched his face, it appeared to be scaly. The scales would peel off as he pawed at his face leaving a disgusting pinkish skin underneath. Malfoy was not seen again until the next morning, and by then the prank had worn out. As far as they knew, no one else ever found out what he had been raving about,

though that did not keep the Hogwarts rumor mill from trying to fill in that gap.

Later that night Harry ascended the stairs to the Headmaster's office for their weekly Occlumency lesson. Dumbledore bid him to enter before he could even knock on the door, and Harry strode into the increasingly familiar office. He greeted the Headmaster and Fawkes as was his custom before settling into the armchair in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"Good evening, Harry. I trust you are well?" the old man asked kindly.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied easily.

"I was wondering if I might have a word with you about the incident Miss Weasley and you found yourselves in last weekend," he said.

Harry nodded, not at all surprised at the turn of conversation.

"First let me say that I am rather proud of the both of you for the way you handled the situation. You both kept your heads and performed admirably in potentially dire circumstances." He paused here as though to gather his thoughts and form his next remark, but Harry thought it was more for the effect. He had a feeling the Headmaster knew exactly what he was going to say next.

"However, it concerns me that you found yourselves in that situation in the first place," he said rather condescendingly. "Knowing the dangers and the state of affairs in the Wizarding World, it troubles me to find that you wandered into a concealed alleyway so far out of the main town. We were lucky this time that your attackers were so inexperienced, but we may not be so lucky next time, which means we need to make sure there is no next time. I don't want to have to take the Hogsmeade trips away from you or any of the students, but I must ask that you exercise greater caution in the future."

Harry nodded, not trusting himself to speak at the moment. He wanted nothing more than to rage at the man for treating him like a

kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He wanted to tell him that he had lured their attackers into the alley, not the other way around, and that he was trying to protect the rest of the students and townsfolk from the inevitable encounter. He seethed inwardly while he attempted to adopt a look of contrition.

“Excellent. I knew you’d understand,” the old man said genially. “Now, onto your lesson...”

Malfoy was hit yet again the next day. This prank succeeded in staining his teeth black. Harry almost missed that one as for once Malfoy tried to avoid opening his mouth. The charm lasted a full 24 hours, and Harry suspected it was the quietest Malfoy had ever been for a full day.

The pranks were a nice way to raise spirits in the castle, though they generally dropped right back down each morning as the Daily Prophet continued to report on the frequent Death Eater attacks throughout Great Britain. It became a regular morning ritual to open up the paper to see where the Death Eaters had struck the night before. Harry did not have visions of any attacks, but his scar was bothering him on a regular basis now. Voldemort was happy to be spreading fear and panic throughout the land once again.

As the attacks continued without any positive news to counteract it, the ministry and Fudge in particular began taking heavy fire from the news reporters. That Saturday morning after reading a particularly scathing article on Minister Fudge, Harry turned to his friends and said, “I don’t see how he’s kept the position as long as he has. I figured he’d be out of a job soon after the news came out that Voldemort had in fact been back for well over a year despite his claims to the contrary.” Harry shot a disgusted look at Ron who had flinched at Voldemort’s name. Even Neville had tempered his response down more than Ron had. Hermione did not make any response, and she even said his name consistently, though she often stumbled through it.

Hermione looked up from the paper, which she had immediately reclaimed once Harry set it down. “He might have if V-Voldemort hadn’t been so quiet for so long. Last June he went on and on about

how easy it was to be mistaken because Voldemort was considerably weaker than he had been in the past. He said that they had everything under control and it would only be a matter of time before they had him safely tucked away in Azkaban.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Harry exclaimed.

“Well of course it is,” Hermione sharply retorted. “But Voldemort was being quiet at the time, so the threat wasn’t real to most people. They just took what he was saying at face value.” Hermione took a sip of pumpkin juice before continuing. “Then there was the attack at Diagon Alley this summer, and nobody was hurt, minimal damage was done...it only lent credence to Fudge’s claims.”

“And now, because Fudge and everybody else were content to just sit back and enjoy the fact that things were quiet for the moment, we’re still completely unprepared for war,” Harry surmised.

“You’re right about that,” Neville agreed. “I overheard my Gran over the summer saying that Professor Dumbledore was lobbying for the auror staff to be increased, more funding sent their way, and other measures to help prepare for the upcoming conflict, but Fudge insisted that the aurors were more than capable of handling the threat, as they already had been.”

“Did the aurors even make it to the Death Eater attack in Diagon Alley this summer?” Harry questioned vehemently.

Ron shook his head and answered that question. “No. By the time they arrived, the Death Eaters were all gone. If Professor Dumbledore hadn’t come when he did...” He left the statement hanging out in the air between them. “And he didn’t even make it in time to help Ginny. Nobody knows who it was that saved her, but thank Merlin for him, whoever he is.” Ron gave a little shiver as the implications of what had almost happened washed over him.

“Yes, I wonder if the Order ever found any information on him,” Hermione said casting a surreptitious glance at Ginny several seats down as she said it. “Ginny says he’s an animagus, but he’s not

registered with the Ministry. I checked the records and none listed were in his age range nor were there any panthers or anything similar. The only registered feline is Professor McGonagall."

"I wonder how many people who manage the transformation actually register," Harry mused aloud. "If you think about it, we've met at least five animagi, and of them only Professor McGonagall is registered. My dad, Sirius, and Wormtail never registered. And Rita Skeeter is still unregistered as well."

"That's a good point," Hermione admitted. "I guess those records probably aren't of very much use since so few people have registered. And the Ministry must not have a way of tracking the magic if so many people have managed to get away without being caught. And Hogwarts students at that."

"That's true," Ron interjected. "The Ministry can only track magic when used by a wand. I think they have very crude means of spotting accidental magic, but I'm not sure how. I heard Mum and Dad talking about it a while back."

Harry laughed. "The Ministry is rather incapable of getting much of anything right, it seems."

"You'll hear no arguments here," Neville agreed. "Even my Gran would probably agree with that."

"Well all I can say is the sooner they get rid of Fudge, the better," Harry grumbled.

"I wouldn't hold your breath," Hermione commented with a sigh, her shoulders slumping slightly.

"Why's that?" Harry questioned her.

"It's not easy to kick the minister out of office, and it has only happened once in recorded history. There is a very real chance that we could be stuck with him for the rest of his term," Hermione lectured uneasily.

“And how long does he have left in his term?” Harry asked, already dreading the answer.

“About two and a half years,” Hermione told him after only a brief hesitation.

“Two and a half bloody years?” Harry asked incredulously. “The country’s bound to be in shambles by then. There’s no way...” Harry couldn’t articulate what he was feeling, so he just groaned and dropped his head into his hands, shaking it incessantly.

Meanwhile Ron griped a “Bloody hell,” which elicited a response from Hermione.

“Ron, language,” she scolded him.

Ron turned hurt eyes to her and accused, “How come you always correct me but never anyone else. Harry just cussed too, but you completely ignored it to yell at me.”

Harry had noticed the same thing, but he was not going to bring it up. He thought it was rather funny. Hermione opened and closed her mouth a few times before finding a suitable response and snapping back, “You’re a prefect, Ron. You should be setting a better example.” She seemed pretty pleased with her response and sat back on the bench giving Ron a smug smile.

Of course, Ron wiped the smirk off her face with his reply. “I may be a prefect, but Harry’s a professor.”

Hermione frowned for a long moment and looked back and forth between Ron and Harry. Finally, she sighed and said, “You’re right, Ron. I just forget, honestly. I’m sorry.” She then turned to Harry and said, “And shame on you for using that type of language in the Great Hall where anyone could hear you. Being a professor is a lot of responsibility, and you need to start taking it more seriously.”

“Unbelievable,” Harry muttered to himself, though it was loud enough for the others to hear. “You are just – ugh,” he groaned in frustration as he ran a hand through his hair. He knew that she had not said anything terrible to him; Hermione was like that all the time, but he found himself just getting frustrated with Hermione in general. And it really bugged him that she would pull his professorial status into it. She acted as if he regularly abused his privileges and did not take the role seriously. He knew that he needed to get out of there before he let himself get angry with her, so he rose up from his seat, gave his friends a curt nod, and strode out of the hall.

OoOoO

Ginny had noticed their exchange, though she could not hear what was said, and shot Hermione a withering glance as she stood from the bench and followed Harry out of the hall. She was glad for the fact that it was a Saturday, so she would not have to worry about making it to class on time. In his frustration and anger, Harry’s stride was long and quick, too much for her to keep up with, let alone catch up to, without breaking into a jog. But she had a pretty good idea of where he was heading, so she followed at her own brisk walk.

She wondered whether or not he would even want her company but decided that the option should be left up to him. If he did not want her there, she had no doubt that he would not hesitate to tell her so. When Harry wanted to be left alone, he could be very vocal about it. He was a man who valued his privacy. But she was not going to let that deter her from trying. If she was turned away, she would go without complaint, stopping only long enough to assure him that she would be there for him if he needed her.

She headed up to the seventh floor into the corridor with the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy and found the door already in place. She strode toward it purposefully and twisted the doorknob unsuccessfully. She was unsurprised to find that it was locked. Harry was always careful about ensuring his privacy. She knocked loudly on the door as she called out, “Harry?” She took a couple steps back and waited. Nothing. She stepped forward and pounded her fist on the door as she shouted, “Harry!” A long moment passed, still nothing.

Had she been thinking more clearly, she would have expected this outcome. Any time she went to his office he always locked and warded the door, and she could only assume he did the same when he was training. She did not know exactly what spells he used, but she could only assume that they would ensure privacy. He would not be able to hear her calling for him, just as no sound would permeate out of the room.

She took a couple steps backward until her body rested against the stone wall opposite the door. What should she do now? She could stay in the hallway and wait for him to come out, but she quickly dismissed that idea. If anyone were to walk by, her presence was sure to raise some questions. It did not take a genius to know that Harry would not appreciate her drawing unneeded attention to the fact that he had locked himself in the Room of Requirement for one reason or another. Plus she did not fancy sitting on the cold, hard stone floor for who knows how long Harry would be in there doing Merlin knows what to alleviate his temper.

She did not want to return to the Common Room though. She did not much feel like being around her classmates at the moment, and she was sure to run across Hermione there as well. It was pretty sad to think that she dreaded running into one of her best friends, but there it was. Hermione had been the one girl that Ginny felt close to at Hogwarts, the one girl she could spill her secrets to. They had grown close over the past couple years, initially drawn together by their mutual frustration with one Ronald Weasley, though their frustrations were of entirely different veins, contrary to what Hermione might have thought at the time.

Their close friendship was rapidly unraveling before her very eyes. Ginny was not in any hurry to do anything about it, not with Hermione acting the way she was, even if she could understand why Hermione behaving in such a way. Harry was keeping a lot of secrets from both her and Ron. Hermione saw that and did not know what to make of it. For the past five years, Ron and she had been Harry's two best friends, the only two people next to Sirius that he really trusted. Having Harry pull a one eighty on her really threw Hermione off, and she just assumed that something was not right with him. If Harry was

not so secretive, she imagined Hermione would loosen up very quickly. This certainly did not excuse Hermione's behaviour, but Harry had to know that he was at least partially at fault for the tension between them.

She did not blame Harry for that. She could certainly see why he was keeping things from Hermione. She completely agreed with his reasoning. He did not have to be so single-minded about it, however. She resolved to talk to him about that before things got any worse. Unfortunately, talking to Hermione was already proving to be useless. For being the cleverest witch in her age group, Hermione could be incredibly thick at times.

She relied too much on her books. Her books had told her how somebody should be dealing with grief over a lost loved one, and when reality played out differently, she was unable to cope. So what did she do? She tried to mould the world around her into her textbook wonderland. She tried to force Harry to grieve for Sirius the way the books told her he should be, and she lashed out at anybody who accepted Harry as he was. She was straining two of the most important friendships she had, and she did not show any signs of stopping. Ginny had tried to talk her out of her current course of action, but it was futile.

She was not even being particularly terrible to Ginny. It was more Ginny's developing friendship with Harry that was causing the strain. Some people might think it wrong for Ginny to abandon her friendship with Hermione in that situation. After all, Hermione had technically been her friend for much longer. That was beside the point though. Harry needed her in a way that Hermione would probably never understand. She sure as hell would not figure it out in a book.

The fact that she was the only one that knew about his wandless magic, his animagus abilities (though Remus knew about the panther, he still did not know of the owl), the extent of his dueling abilities, and that bloody cupboard under the stairs.... Harry needed somebody he could trust. He never really had anybody he could place his absolute trust in, and Ginny was determined to be that person. Not only did she really want to be that person, but she felt she owed it to him as well. He had saved her life more than once now. She had learned the

first of his secrets as a result of one of his rescues. And rather than trying to push her out or even obliterating her, he had welcomed her in, shared even more of himself with her. He was already beginning to trust her, and she was not about to blow that just because Hermione had a ruddy pole stuck up her arse.

Ginny shook her head clear of her thoughts. She needed someplace private where she would not be bothered by anyone. Gryffindor Tower was out of the question, and she did not want to risk an empty classroom. Anyone was liable to wander in. Then a thought struck her. There was one place she could go where only one other person could follow, and he was the one person whose company she would not mind at the moment. Quickly making her decision, Ginny made her way to the fifth floor and Harry's office.

She shut the door behind her and plopped down into one of the chairs there as though this was her office and not Harry's. With how much time she spent there, she was rather used to making herself comfortable and treating it as something of a private sitting room that she was always welcome to. She glanced over at the empty fireplace and lit a fire with a flick of her wand and a muttered "Incendio."

Now that she was here and alone, she needed something to do. She thought of the essays she should be working on at the moment, but could not muster the motivation to return to her dorm room to retrieve them. This was her OWL year, and while her teachers seemed determined to cram in as much as they could before the break began, Ginny was not too worried just yet. She might have an extra busy day tomorrow as a result of her inactivity today, but she would not fall too far behind as a result.

She wracked her brain for something to do to pass the time, as she lifted her legs off the ground and curled them underneath herself. She thought back to the previous weekend which had been spent Christmas shopping in Hogsmeade. She went over the list of her closest friends and family to make sure she had not missed anybody. She had gotten presents for her mum, dad, all her brothers, her roommates, Hermione, Luna, and Neville. That left only one person, Harry, but she already knew what she was getting him.

She was determined to get the perfect gift for Harry. Not only had they become very close this term, but he had given her the best birthday present she had ever received back in August, and she was determined to repay the favor. Emerald, her pure black cat – she could not be called a kitten anymore as she had grown so much the past few months – was rather precious to Ginny. Not only did Ginny absolutely love cats to begin with, but she had always wanted a pet of her own.

That is exactly what Em was for her, a pet all her own. She was not just a family pet, or somebody else's pet that she happened to get along well with, like Crookshanks. Emerald was her cat. Em seemed to enjoy being Ginny's as well because the black cat was very particular about the company she kept. There was only one person besides Ginny that Em would ever approach and seek attention from, and Ginny approved of her choice.

Em was the absolutely most perfect gift anybody had ever given her. She did not hold it against her family that they had never given her anything as wonderful as Emerald. Her family did not have much money, so her parents normally resorted to homemade gifts. Ginny loved her Weasley jumpers and would not trade them for the world. And she appreciated every gift she received, even Ron's chocolate frogs and other assorted candy. She laughed as she remembered something Harry had written to her over the summer.

Ron sent him Chudley Cannons memorabilia. It was so typically Ron. He bought for others what he wanted for himself. It was incredibly sweet but so misguided that she did not know whether to laugh or to smack her brother upside the head. She was just glad that he did not buy her anything of the Cannons. Candy was always put to good use.

She had thought long and hard about what she could possibly get Harry before the answer hit her like a ton of bricks. It was such an obvious gift in many ways, but she was sure that no one else would think to get it for him, nor would they pay the money for it. It had set her back a pretty galleon, and she had been forced to ask Fred and George to loan her some money, promising to work it off in some way. When she told them what the money was for, they told her not to

worry about it. They owed Harry so much that they were glad to contribute to his gift, but she still insisted that she would find some way to pay them back.

She could not purchase it in Hogsmeade; the only place she knew of to go to was in Diagon Alley. She convinced Fred and George to put the order in for her as well, since they were conveniently in the neighbourhood with their own shop. It would arrive in plenty of time for Christmas. She hoped that he would like it as much as she thought he would. In the end she knew it was the thought that counted. She had seen the way Harry reacted to any gift he was given; he would love it if for no other reason than the fact that she had thought to give it to him. As much as he might joke about Ron giving him a Chudley Cannons poster, Ginny knew that he still appreciated the gift, not for itself but for the friendship and thought behind it.

Ginny still had a lot of time on her hands to kill and did not know what to do with herself. She let her eyes wander around his office as she slid her legs out from under herself and back to the ground. She saw his Firebolt hanging on the wall and stifled a grimace knowing she was the reason it was there and unusable. There were several books on a shelf against the wall, and she was tempted to look through them for anything of interest, but she felt that would be invading his privacy. She had not exactly been invited into his office, after all. She had let herself in, and she did not want to invade his privacy any more by going through his belongings without his permission, so she held back.

In the end, she decided to do what she almost always did when she was in Harry's office. She let her magic flow within her and concentrated on her hand. She willed it into a golden paw, and moments later she was met with success. She had gotten better and better with her partial transformations over the past month since she had made the first change. She had also read several books that she found in the library to go along with her animagus training. Harry's methods were completely unorthodox, but she could not deny the results. According to the books, it should take an experienced person months, possibly years, of intensive study and training to manage the transformation.

It should have been months of daily training to get to the point she was at now. After Harry had given her that boost by letting her feel his magic when he was geared up to transform, she had quickly caught on; the fact that she had been practicing wandless magic for the past couple months helped out in a lot of ways. She was now able to call her magic up with ease, and even if she could not cast spells at will the way Harry could, she could transform virtually every part of her body into that of a lioness.

She had yet to try a full transformation. She knew that it was a dangerous leap to make, but she felt that she was ready for it. She could change each hand, each foot into paws. She could change her head. She could change her back. What was stopping her from making the whole change? Nothing really. She had been discussing it with Harry recently, and they had decided that she was ready to give it a try soon.

She continued changing parts of her body back and forth. She changed her hand back and forth, then she included her full arm in it. She did the same with the other, then both at the same time. She repeated this process with her legs. She changed her left foot back and forth, then the whole leg. She did the same with the right, before doing both legs at the same time. She reverted back to human form, then changed all four limbs at once.

Bolstered by her continued success, Ginny got up from her seat and onto all fours on the ground. She changed everything but her head into a lioness, and had the odd sensation of being almost a full lion. With a small amount of effort, she returned to fully human form. Taking a deep breath and steeling herself, she made the full change. She felt her body changing, stretching in some places, shrinking in others, pulling and pushing. After a long moment, she was on all fours ready to pounce.

She experimented with expanding and retracting her claws for a moment. She had done this before when she had been experimenting with partial transformations, but she still marveled at the feeling and at the sight of her deadly claws. She gave a growl as

she stalked around his office for a moment. She sat in front of the fire before she got into position to pounce yet again.

She jumped up onto the chair she had occupied only a couple minutes before and curled up into a ball as she purred to herself contentedly. She imagined Harry's face as he walked into his office to find a lioness waiting for him and grinned as well as a feline could at the thought, her purring increasing in volume. Before she got carried away with herself, Ginny changed back into human form to be sure that she could. She was not nearly as quick or fluid with the transformation as Harry was. It took a long moment to complete, but she managed it just fine.

Ginny smiled to herself and changed back. She was beginning to grow fatigued with all the exercise she was putting her magic through, so she hopped up onto the sofa to lounge and rest until Harry arrived. She allowed her eyes to close and her body to relax in the warmth and softness of the cushions on the sofa.

Some time later, she was awakened by the sound of footsteps approaching in the hallway outside. Her ears perked up at the noise, and she sat up from the sofa. She jumped down onto the ground and crouched low, ready to pounce at a moment's notice. She watched the door avidly as she heard the footsteps just outside. The handle turned with a little click, and the door swung open.

Harry stood silhouetted in the doorway for a moment before he took a step inside. He did not notice her right away. He shut the door behind himself and turned toward his desk. With a low growl, she sprang towards him. With the minimal warning, Harry was beginning to move, but he did not get very far before Ginny was upon him. She knocked him to the floor and held him down with her paws on his chest as she looked deeply into his eyes and leaned forward to lick his cheek.

"Ginny?" he asked incredulously.

Ginny purred her response and rubbed her nose against his cheek.

“ You did it,” Harry excitedly exclaimed. “That’s amazing. Congratulations.” He was beaming at her, yet still trapped underneath her weight. Then his face darkened a fraction. “Why didn’t you wait for me? The transformation is dangerous. Something could have happened.”

Ginny did her best to look repentant as she sunk her face down into his chest and put a paw over her eyes. Harry could not help the laugh that escaped him at her action. It was cute and incredibly funny. She gave him another lick on the cheek in appreciation. Harry looked down at her and lifted a hand to stroke her fur. She leaned into his hand, and Harry smiled as he scratched behind her ear. She purred into his chest as he continued to scratch.

Finally Harry set his hand back down at his side and asked, “You going to let me up sometime soon, or were you planning on pinning me to the floor all night? Not that that’s an altogether unappealing prospect,” Harry added with a teasing wink. With that said, Harry transformed into a panther and quickly freed himself out from underneath her grip. Before she had a chance to recover, he pounced on top of her and wrestled her to the ground playfully. He swatted his paws at her, careful to make sure that his claws were retracted so as not to injure her.

He had her on her back quickly, with his front paws pinning her chest to the ground. She lashed at him with her own front paw and her claws slashed across his face. He leapt away from her in pain, and quickly changed back to human form. “Merlin, Ginny!” he shouted as he clutched a hand to his bleeding face. He took his hand away from his face and saw that it was covered in his own blood.

In a moment, Ginny was back to her human self hurrying towards him. “I’m so sorry, Harry. I didn’t mean to,” she frantically gushed out in apology. “I’m not used to being in animal form. I just let my instincts take over for a second and...” she waved her hands in front of her gesturing towards Harry’s face.

“It’s alright,” he relented with a sigh. “I probably shouldn’t have tackled you like that, especially so soon after you had managed to

transform. I just thought it would be fun to have another cat to play with.”

She took a step towards him and held her hand out to his face. “Let me take a look at that,” she said in a soft voice.

“No, that’s alright,” Harry replied. He was already beginning to call up his magic to heal the wound. He slowly dragged his hand across the slash marks marring his face as he let his magic loose on the wound. He could feel the skin mending beneath his fingertips.

Ginny marveled at Harry’s healing touch, as it appeared to her eyes, though her brain knew that he was casting spells through his hand. She took another step forward as his hand fell from his face, and she carefully reached out her own two hands to take a look at his newly healed features. “It looks much better, though you can still see a faint trace of the claw marks,” she remarked as she trailed her fingers down the pink lines that marked his skin. She looked into his eyes to find him staring back at her. “We need something to clean you off with, Mr. Potter. We can’t have you walking the halls with your face covered in blood, can we?”

Ginny tried to think of something she could do to help, but she was coming up blank. “The only thing I can think of is a scourgify, but I don’t think that’s the best solution for cleaning your face,” she finally told him.

He chuckled at her and said, “No, I don’t think that would be too comfortable.” With a wave of his hand he conjured a bowl and another flick had it filled with water. His last trick was to conjure a flannel, which he dunked into the bowl of water and lifted up to his face.

“Let me,” she said, reaching out for the towel. He hesitated as he looked back up into her eyes. After a short moment, when he still hadn’t made a move, she snapped, “You’ll have a rough time cleaning yourself with no mirror to look in. Besides, I’m the one responsible for this mess anyway. The least I can do is clean you up.”

He handed over the flannel to her and lifted up his chin. "Come over here," she said, dragging him over to one of the armchairs. She forced him down as she perched on the arm of the chair, flannel still in hand. She turned his head away from her so she could get a better view of the offended cheek. Slowly, she reached up with the flannel and began to wipe at the blood staining his tanned skin. She noticed that all the time he spent outside running and flying had been kind to him. He was no longer as pale as he had been.

Ginny began with gentle wipes, but as some of the red staining his skin refused to budge, she began increasing in pressure slightly. Eventually, all traces of blood were gone. She turned his head this way and that, searching for more evidence. She found some more blood underneath his jaw bone and quickly cleaned it off. After giving him another once over, she deemed him clean and deposited the blood-stained flannel back into the conjured basin. "All better," she declared, rising from her perch, suddenly aware of how close she was to him.

"Thank you," he told her, only briefly glancing up to her before his gaze settled across the room. "So what were you doing in my office, anyway? And why did you change without me here?" he finally broke the silence that had settled between them.

"After you stormed out of breakfast, I followed you up to the Room of Requirement," she told him as she deposited herself in the chair across from him. "By the time I got there, you had already locked the door and didn't hear me calling for you. I didn't feel like going to the Common Room and decided I wanted some privacy, and this was the best place I could think of. After I came here, I realized I had nothing to occupy myself with, so I started doing partial transformations, then decided to go for the full transformation. I didn't plan on trying it, it just happened. I felt confident that I could do it, and it worked. I did it." By the end she was marveling at her own achievement.

"I'm proud of you," Harry told her honestly, his green gaze meeting her brown eyes. "Though I can't say I'm surprised. I knew you'd get it in no time."

“Thanks to you,” she replied. Harry scoffed at the idea, but she persisted. “I mean it, Harry. I’ve read a couple books on the animagus transformation, and there’s no way I should have progressed this far so fast. Even if I was training daily, I still shouldn’t have managed the full transformation so quickly.”

“That just proves that you’re no ordinary witch,” Harry replied, sitting back in his chair. “That’s got nothing to do with me.”

“Then who was the one teaching me,” Ginny inquired. “Who was the one who came up with the idea to teach me wandless magic first? That’s not in any of the books; that was your idea, Harry. And who was it that thought to show me what the magic felt like to make it easier on me? I didn’t even know something like that was possible before you did it.” Ginny’s tone was insistent; she wasn’t going to give this up.

“Neither did I,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “I just tried that on a whim.”

“And it helped me immensely,” she persisted. “I never would have managed this without you. Thank you, Harry.”

Harry waved away her comment. “There’s nothing to thank me for. I enjoyed our training, and I learned more about the transformation and my magic in the process.”

“Why can’t you just accept my thanks?” Ginny huffed. “Honestly, all I want is to thank you for your help, and you’re determined not to let me for some reason.”

Harry held his hand up in a placating gesture. “Alright, alright. I know I’m difficult. You don’t need to tell me, but if it makes you happy, then you are quite welcome. It’s really been fun to teach you.”

Ginny flashed him a bright smile. “Thank you, Harry. It’s too bad I learned so quickly, now we won’t have any excuses to get together so often,” she boldly teased.

“Oh, I’m sure I could come up with something,” Harry deadpanned.

“You do, do you?” Ginny inquired.

“Of course,” Harry replied. “I have quite an extensive knowledge of magic and defense. It shouldn’t be too difficult to find something I can teach you.”

“You know, Professor Potter, your ego seems to be inflating at a dangerous rate,” Ginny said quite seriously. “Perhaps it’s best if you have the extra time to come up with some spell to deflate yourself before all the hot air in your head has you floating away.”

Harry studied her for a moment, noticing the mischievous glint in her eye. “I don’t know, Miss Weasley, I think it might be a little too late for that,” Harry said as he stood up from his seat. He then tried something that he had never even thought to try before. He levitated himself several inches off the ground. “If only you had finished your transformation and thought up this plan sooner, I might have had the time to save myself. But alas, I fear we are too late.” Harry held a hand up to his forehead in a mock swoon.

“Oi, knock it off Potter,” Ginny fired as she rose from her seat and gave Harry a playful shove.

“Watch it, Weasley. I’m floating here,” Harry scolded.

“Which makes you all the more easy to push around,” Ginny retorted as she gave him another shove, pushing him a good meter back before Harry was able to stop himself.

“You’re in for it now,” Harry warned her as he dropped himself to the ground and instead levitated Ginny several inches into the air.

“Harry!” she shrieked. “What are you doing? Put me down.” She was waving her arms around trying to get her bearings, but she was not in any danger of falling. Harry had her steady in the air.

“The tables have turned, Miss Weasley,” Harry lectured as he slowly paced back and forth in front of her. “Next time you might think twice before you try pushing around your wise and powerful teacher.”

“Forgive me, oh wise one,” Ginny playfully begged. “I do not know what came over me. Please, I will do anything you ask of me.”

Harry smirked. “Careful what you promise, Miss Weasley. You never know what I might ask.” He waggled his eyebrows at her suggestively, and her face flooded with heat at the implication. “But you don’t have to worry about that. I think I can settle for you bowing down before me to ask for my forgiveness.”

Harry lowered Ginny to the ground and watched her expectantly. Ginny took a moment to regain her bearings on her feet before she turned to Harry and met his gaze. “If you think I’m just going to bow down before you, Harry, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“I believe you promised that you would do anything I asked of you,” Harry returned. “I don’t think that is too much to ask.” When Ginny did not make a move but continued to challengingly meet his gaze, Harry took matters into his own hands. “I said, bow,” Harry commanded as he again reached out with his magic to force Ginny into a bow.

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An overwhelming sense of déjà vu flashed through Harry’s mind, and his playful smirk was wiped clean off his face. Suddenly, he was picturing himself in a graveyard surrounded by figures in dark robes and masks. Harry’s leg was throbbing painfully from his encounter with the spider guarding the Triwizard Tournament Cup. He was resigning himself to his own death but refusing to give in without a fight, refusing to let Voldemort play with him.

Voldemort wanted a duel, a formal duel. He instructed Harry to bow, but Harry refused to give him the satisfaction. Voldemort’s high pitched voice pierced the chilly air, “I said, bow.” And Harry’s spine was bent forward as though an invisible hand had ruthlessly forced it forward. He was surrounded by the laughter of the Death Eaters.

And suddenly Harry was back in his office again. Ginny was lifting her head up with a grin. "That's a neat little trick there, Potter. If I didn't know any better I'd say you had prac-tice."

OoOoO

Ginny's teasing tone left her as she noticed Harry's complete change in demeanor. Her smile vanished as she rushed forward to close the distance between them. "Harry? Harry, what's wrong?" she asked him softly and urgently, reaching out a hand to squeeze his shoulder.

Harry's eyes flicked to hers, and she was caught completely off guard by the intensity of his gaze. His green eyes were like a window into his haunted soul. His pain was laid bare before her, and she felt a heavy pressure descend upon her chest making it hard for her to breathe. The only coherent thought she could manage was 'What happened?' He had been completely fine and playful one second, and the next he was bereft.

Harry cast his eyes downward and began mumbling rapidly and almost incoherently. "I don't know what came over me. I'm so sorry. I'm really not like him at all, I swear it." He was shaking his head repeatedly.

"Shh, Harry," Ginny cooed soothingly, at a complete loss as to what was going on. She gripped his shoulders and guided him to the sofa. She forced him to sit down, then for lack of a better idea climbed right onto his lap. She braced herself with one knee on either side of him and tilted his face up to meet hers. "Tell me what's wrong, Harry."

He just stared vacantly, as if he did not even see her there right in front of him. He made no indication that he had even heard her question, but the expression on his face was very telling. There was horror there and shame. She had no idea what could cause him to react in such a way, all she knew was that he needed some comfort.

"It's okay, Harry. I'm not mad at you," Ginny told him sincerely as she brushed a hand across his cheek and through his hair, hoping to

allay his fears. Honestly, she had no idea what she would even be upset about. He had apologized for something though, so she hoped that he would calm down once he realized she was not upset about anything. After a moment she leaned forward and pulled him into a hug, one of her hands continued to softly stroke his hair, the other was gently caressing his back. Harry slowly brought his arms up around her and tucked his head down into her shoulder. He seemed to be holding on as if for dear life.

Eventually he began to relax his hold on her. When she felt his body start to loosen up, she leaned back and asked him again, "What's wrong, Harry?"

His ghostly green eyes met her warm brown ones yet again as he answered hesitantly, "Voldemort. He – I didn't mean – I'm not like him. I'm sorry I..."

"Well of course you're not like him," Ginny blurted out, completely taken aback at his response. She had jumped back slightly in surprise at his statement, nearly overbalancing herself. Once she had righted herself she asked, "Why would you ever think otherwise? Even better, why are you worried that I would ever think so?"

"I...made you bow – you didn't want to, but I made you do it. I didn't really mean it. I'm sorry," Harry told her with an alarming sincerity.

"Shh. It was just a joke, Harry. We were just playing around. I'm not mad at you. Why has this shaken you up?" She spoke softly and soothingly, hoping to find out whatever it was that was troubling him so much. She was feeling uneasy herself, seeing Harry, the epitome of strength, crumble so quickly before her eyes, and she was determined to find out what had caused it and to help him move past it.

"It was just like in the graveyard," Harry answered in a haunted voice that she could not associate with him. "He made me. I didn't want to do it, but he made me. There was nothing I could do to stop him, and I did the same thing to you. But I didn't mean to; I wasn't

thinking.” His eyes were beseeching her own for forgiveness for his assumed transgressions.

“Graveyard?” she questioned. “You mean when Voldemort was reborn?” He nodded in response. “He made you bow to him?” she continued to prod. Another nod. “And now you think that because you made me bow to you, that you’re no better than him?” she asked, cottoning on. Another dejected nod. “Oh Harry,” she cried, scooting further forward on his lap and taking his face into her hands, bringing her own so close that their noses nearly bumped. She left him little choice but to meet her gaze dead on. “You are nothing like him. I could never think that of you, and you should never think that of yourself. Voldemort made you bow to him because he wanted to exalt himself while demeaning you. You are not like that. You made me bow to be playful and have fun. Right?”

Harry nodded in her hands as he searched her face for any signs of insincerity. She must have passed his test for he offered her a small smile as he said, “You said his name.”

She stared at him for a full minute before comprehending what he had just said. “So I did,” she admitted, surprised at herself.

“Thanks, Ginny,” he told her earnestly. He dropped his head to her shoulder and wrapped both of his arms around her again, pulling her into a tight hug. “What would I ever do without you?” he murmured near her ear.

As he released her from the hug, she slid off of him onto her knees and offered him a small smirk. “Wallow in self pity, no doubt.”

“You’re probably right,” Harry admitted. “I guess it’s a good thing I’ve got you around to set me straight.”

“I don’t know how you ever got on without me,” she teased, giving him a playful pat on his knees as she stood up.

Harry stuck his tongue out at her. “Let me see you transform again,” Harry said to her.

“If you insist,” Ginny said with a fraudulent sigh, happy for the excuse to move past that topic. A moment later a beautiful, golden furred lioness stood in front of the sofa.

OoOoO

Harry studied her for a long moment. When the firelight caught her just right, he could see a reddish tint to her fur, no doubt in honour of her fiery red hair.

He took her face in his hands to look more closely, scratching behind her ears while he was at it. He smirked amusedly when she began purring in response. To his surprise he discovered what he guessed were her identifying marks. There were a series of brown flecks across the fur on her face. It appeared that even in lion form she could not escape her freckles. He let out a bellow of a laugh. “You’ve got freckles,” he told her once he recovered from his laughing fit.

Ginny pulled her head out of his hands and reverted back into human form. “What do you mean? And why are you laughing?” she demanded. She was standing in front of him with her hands on her hips looking every bit as intimidating as her mother.

Harry was not cowed. He knew that she was all bark. She would only bite if he gave her plenty reason to, and he liked to think that he was not foolish enough to push her that far. “You have brown specks in the fur on your face. I think they’re your identifying marks.” He studied her face for a long moment. “They match the freckles on your face,” Harry added with a smug grin.

“Harry James Potter,” Ginny shouted. Harry continued to look entirely unrepentant. “I manage to transform into a lioness, and all you can do is tease me about my freckles?”

“Well, it was just a thought I had that was funny,” Harry replied, still grinning like an idiot.

“Oh, and what thought was that?” Ginny demanded.

“Well with all the pranking we’ve been doing I thought that it would be cool to follow in my father’s and Sirius’s footsteps,” Harry explained. “With Fred and George gone, this school is short on mischief, and I thought that it was about time the Marauders made a return. I was planning on bringing it up with you as soon as you managed the transformation since the Marauders were all animagi.”

Ginny’s face softened immediately. “Oh Harry, that’s so sweet. I’d love to be a Marauder with you.” As quick as her face had softened, it changed again to a look of suspicion. “That still doesn’t explain why you were laughing at me.”

“Well, I knew that we would eventually have to pick out Marauder names for ourselves to go along with our animals. When I saw your freckles, I immediately thought of how funny it would be to call you Freckles,” Harry told her while struggling to control his mirth.

“Harry James Potter!” Ginny shrieked for the second time in as many minutes. “You will wipe that thought out of your head, or I’ll do it for you. You are not going to call me Freckles.” Her hands were again on her hips, and she stamped her foot down for emphasis. Harry knew that she was getting close to the point where she would hex first and ask questions later.

He held up his hands in front of himself in a placating gesture. “I wouldn’t actually try to name you that,” Harry assured her. “But it just popped into my head, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Freckles would hardly be a proper name for a Marauder.”

“Yeah, well let’s see you transform again. Maybe I can find something to make fun of you for,” Ginny grumbled, though most of her fire seemed to have died out.

“You’ve already seen me transformed,” Harry told her.

“Yes, but I didn’t get a chance to take a good look at you. You were a little busy saving my life at the time, remember?”

“Oh. Right.” Harry shook his head at himself. That was an obvious one, really. Sometimes he wondered why he spoke without thinking first. “All right then.” Harry transformed into a panther and trotted over to Ginny for inspection.

Ginny plopped into the nearest armchair and took his face into her hands to examine his panther form. “Well the green eyes are the most obvious thing. That’s the first thing I noticed when I first saw you.” She looked closely at his fur. “Hmm,” she murmured as she was looking at his forehead. Harry backed up a little and looked into her face with what he hoped was a curious expression. He never knew what he would look like while in animal form. It must have come across somewhat successfully, for Ginny explained herself. “Oh, it’s nothing Harry. I just kind of expected there to be a mark or something where your scar would be, but there’s nothing. I suppose you’ll be happy to hear that.”

She took another moment to look at him. She smirked as she noticed one other peculiarity of his form. “Well, you look pretty normal overall. Except...your fur sticks up at an odd angle up here,” she said as she reached to the back of his head.

After a short moment, Harry was again standing before her. “No! Really? I thought I had finally rid myself of that problem when I grew my hair out. It figures that it would come back to haunt me in animal form,” Harry said disgustedly.

“Now, now,” Ginny soothed. “It’s nothing to get worked up about. I always liked your hair before,” she said with a far away look in her eyes. “Not that I don’t like your hair now. It’s just not you. It looks good the way it is now, but before it was just uniquely you. I don’t know how to explain it any better than that.”

“Er, thank you?” Harry said uncertainly. “I can always change it back.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ginny dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. “You shouldn’t change your appearance for me. Keep your hair however you like it. Honestly, it does look good the way it is now.”

“You sure?” Harry asked in a rare moment of insecurity. He worried that maybe his hair really did not look as good as he thought. What if he had been walking around for the past few months looking like an idiot?

“Are you blind, Harry?” Ginny asked him in response, completely confusing Harry.

“What do you mean?”

“Honestly, don’t you notice the way half the girls in this castle stare at you?” Ginny asked in exasperation.

Harry just gave a half-hearted shrug as he sat back onto the sofa. “People always stare at me. When I was little it was because I was always wearing Dudley’s giant cast-offs and my aunt and uncle told everyone I was a miscreant. When I entered the Wizarding World it was because some dark wizard failed to kill me as a baby. Since then I’ve been stared at for being the Heir of Slytherin, the Champion who cheated his way into the Triwizard Tournament, the boy who lived while Cedric died, and the crazy, attention-seeking, lie-spreading kid the Daily Prophet painted me as last year. I know that people stare at me; I just stopped paying attention.”

Ginny heaved a great sigh. “Seriously Harry, you look great. You look so much different than last year that I was startled when I first saw you. And you know that Ron and Hermione had even worse reactions. It’s not for bad reasons, either. You look great, more mature. You look like a man, Harry. You’re a man among boys, and the girls have noticed.”

“And changing my hair did that?” Harry asked thickly.

Ginny let out a snort of laughter. “Hardly. But the hair adds to the change. There’s so much that changed that I don’t even know where to start. You grew some over the summer, in height a little bit, but mostly just in your frame. You were always such a scrawny little thing, no offense, but you were. You’ve filled out though. All that time

running and working out has done wonders for you. But more than that, you carry yourself differently. You're no longer the boy who was nervous and insecure, always shying away from the spotlight. You're confident, self-assured. You're indifferent to the attention people pay to you; you even admitted so yourself. It all adds up to paint a very different picture than the Harry Potter we're all used to seeing."

"I never really thought about any of that," Harry said honestly.

"That's part of the appeal, Harry. You're this great, good looking guy, and you don't even realize it. You don't play yourself up like most guys try to, and you have plenty more to brag about than any other student here. And Merlin, Harry, you're powerful. People are naturally attracted to power, and you've got it in spades. When you let me watch you fight that mock duel in the Room of Requirement, I couldn't believe my eyes. I've never seen anybody duel like that, and you do it all without a wand as well."

"But nobody else knows that or has seen that," Harry objected. "Nobody knows what I can do except for you."

Ginny gave him a sympathetic look that was tinged with a bit of frustration. Harry just could not seem to understand the way other people saw him. "They don't need to see that to know you're powerful. A good chunk of them see it every time you step forward to teach the D – HA. Everybody saw you in the Triwizard Tournament. You were years younger than everybody else, but you still managed to keep up and even surpass the rest of them. People see it in your classes. From what I hear you've been giving Hermione a run for her money, and that's saying something."

Ginny leaned forward in her chair. "I want you to really listen to me when I say this, Harry. You're a great guy. You're a great leader. You're powerful and strong, yet kind and compassionate. You're self-confident, yet modest almost to a fault. And you are without a doubt one of the most attractive guys at Hogwarts. Someday you're going to make some girl extremely happy, Harry."

‘And I wish it was me.’ The thought came unbidden to Ginny’s mind, and she sat back as the full reality of everything she had said came back to her. It was true; she did wish it could be her. She had long ago given up her crush on Harry Potter, if you consider two years to be a long time anyway. At the end of her third year she had officially given it up and began to concentrate more on herself. She still cared for Harry – she could never deny that – but she let go of any romantic notions. If he was to be a part of her life, it would be as a friend.

Since she made that decision, she had not really allowed herself to give much thought to anything beyond friendship with Harry. She was eventually able to convince herself that she was indeed over Harry Potter for good, and she may very well have been. Then she just went and fell for him all over again, but it was different this time. She was not a little star struck fan girl, and Harry was not a twelve-year-old boy who was very easily embarrassed and had no clue when it came to girls.

This time they were friends. To be perfectly honest, he had quickly become her best friend. They got along very well. They never lacked for conversation, and they always had fun with each other. She had never seen Harry have so much fun in any of her previous four years at Hogwarts, and she had been watching, though she would never admit that to anyone. She knew she could not take the full credit for Harry’s enjoyment that year, but she could not help but think that she had at least played an important part in it.

Over the past several months, she had gotten to know the real Harry Potter, not the romanticized version of him she had kept in her head in her earlier years. The funny thing was that the two were hardly different. The real Harry had all of the same qualities that her dream Harry had, but he came with so much more depth. This Harry had a tragic past that went way beyond the death of his parents. The real Harry had the worst life of anybody she knew, yet he was a good person in spite of it. The reality of it only made Harry more appealing.

She could hardly believe it, but her imaginary Harry failed to live up to the real thing. Harry was not perfect by any means. Last year had been a true testament to that, with his broodiness and temper. She had been expecting a lot more of the same this year, but Harry had

other things in mind. He bounced back from yet another tragedy in his life far better than anybody could have hoped. He was rash as well, never willing to sit back and let others handle things. The fact that he insisted on sneaking out of the castle to help the Order fight on Halloween was tribute to that, but that was also one of the things she loved about him. He was unwilling to stand aside while others were hurt or in danger. He never stopped to consider his own safety when he saw others in need of help.

Ginny was broken out of her thoughts when Harry cleared his throat a little uneasily and said, "Well what about you?"

Ginny stared at him for a long minute, trying to figure out just what in the name of Merlin he was talking about. She gave up and asked, "What about me?"

"If you're so keen to pick up on the way people have been looking at me, then surely you've noticed the amount of attention you've been receiving," Harry answered with a smirk.

Ginny laughed somewhat uncomfortably. "Me? Yeah right. You don't have to say that, Harry."

"If you can key me in, why can't I do the same for you? You know, I had quite a few death glares sent my way after I asked you to the ball right away before anybody else even had a chance. I was watching my back for days half expecting to be hexed every time I turned a corner," Harry told her only slightly jokingly.

"Ha ha, Harry," Ginny shot back. "Very funny. But I was being serious."

"And what makes you think I wasn't?" Harry asked right back. "Okay, so I didn't actually fear for my life or anything, but I did receive quite a few nasty glares in the days following the announcement of the ball. And that doesn't even count your brother."

"I think you're embellishing a little bit, Harry. I can believe a couple," Ginny replied self-consciously.

“And there’s that modesty,” Harry retorted with a grin. “Seriously, Gin. You’ve grown up a bit yourself. Sure, you’re still tiny, but if you don’t mind my saying so, you’ve grown up in all the right places,” Harry told her with a waggle of his eyebrows. “You’re gorgeous, Gin. I know I’ll be the envy of many guys at the ball in a couple weeks.”

“So is that all I am then,” Ginny asked him, “a hot body for guys to leer at and parade around?”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Harry scolded. “You are one of the strongest people I know.”

“How am I strong?” Ginny asked, thinking back to the weakness she had showed in her first year.

“Did I ever tell you about what happened after I chased Bellatrix Lestrange that night we went to the Department of Mysteries?” Harry asked suddenly.

“Umm...no, I don’t think so,” Ginny hesitantly replied.

“Well a lot happened, actually, but Voldemort showed up, and he and Dumbledore dueled. Then, after a bit, Voldemort disappeared and possessed me,” Harry told her, watching her closely.

Her eyes snapped to his at his last statement, sparkling fiercely, but she said nothing. “I cannot even begin to describe what that feels like, nor would I need to describe it to you. He possessed me for not a couple minutes, and I couldn’t take it. I was ready to beg Dumbledore to just kill me and be done with it after those short minutes, but you fought him off for months, Ginny. Months. You want to talk about strength. That is strength. I wouldn’t have had the strength to go through that, especially not alone. You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit.” Ginny looked away from Harry as he began talking again, but he refused to avert his gaze and was still watching her, waiting for her reaction.

Ginny was silent for a long time, her gaze plastered to the floor in front of her. After several long, silent minutes she finally looked up to meet his gaze, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "I was weak," she proclaimed softly. "I was afraid to tell anybody about it. If I hadn't been so stupid and weak, I never would have fallen into that trap in the first place, and I would have gone for help before it escalated so much."

"Bollocks!" Harry interrupted standing from the sofa to pace around his office. "Yes, you made some mistakes. You were naïve and a little foolish, understandable in an eleven year old girl away from her home for the first time. You fell for a trick set up by one of the cleverest wizards in the world, but you were never weak. You were stubborn and foolish not to seek help, but you fought him off for months, Ginny. A weaker person would have given up long before you."

"But that's not where your real strength is showcased," Harry continued before she had a chance to respond. "You've shown your real strength every day since. Look at you. You have every reason to hate the world, to lash out at it for what happened to you, but you haven't. You spent months in his clutches, and you didn't let it destroy you. If there's anybody else that can understand what you went through, it's me. And frankly, I don't know how you've managed to cope, yet you have. You managed to get through that ordeal without losing your spirit, and I'm amazed every day I see you by that strength. So don't you dare try to tell me that you're weak."

Ginny rose from her chair and stopped Harry's pacing as she encircled him in her arms, laying her head against his chest. Harry returned the hug, squeezing her tightly. They stood that way just holding each other for a long minute before Ginny leaned up and whispered into his ear, "Thank you."

Harry shivered slightly as he felt her warm breath on his ear. They broke apart a moment later. Ginny looked up at him a little nervously. "As long as we're having these serious discussions, there was something else I wanted to bring up with you."

“What’s that?” Harry asked her in a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

“Well, it’s about Hermione,” Ginny began, “and Ron to a lesser extent. I know that you’ve been having issues with the two of them all term, and I know it’s not necessarily my place to get involved, but I hate watching you continue to grow further and further apart. I think you’re being a little too hard on them.”

Harry moved to interrupt, but Ginny held up a hand. “Wait, just let me clarify that. They’ve both been acting unreasonable all term long, but they’ve had some reason to react in that way. You made a conscious decision to keep secrets from them. I know why you did it, and I fully agree with your reasoning and your decision, but they don’t know what’s going on with you or why you’ve put that distance between them. That doesn’t excuse how they’ve both been acting, but you can’t lay all the blame on them. You did start all of this in motion.”

“Well what do you propose I do?” Harry asked her a bit testily.

“There’s no need to get snippy,” Ginny scolded gently.

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just so frustrated with them right now.”

“I know,” Ginny commiserated. “Truth is, so am I. But if you don’t do something, things will just keep deteriorating until you can’t even stand spending time with them, and I know you don’t want that.”

“So what can I do?” Harry asked.

“You have to find something to share with them. It can be something insignificant to you, but it needs to seem like something more important to them. Especially Hermione. You need to make them feel like you still trust them and you’re still confiding in them. They need that reassurance that you’re not just abandoning them.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “You really think that will work?”

Ginny smiled reassuringly at him. “I do.”

Harry stepped forward and wrapped his arms back around her in a tight hug. "Thank you," he said emotionally. He felt lighter somehow, as if his burden just lessened slightly now that he had some idea how to make things better with his two former best friends. He had not realized just how much their fallout had affected him until that moment.

"You're welcome, Harry," Ginny replied as she returned the hug in kind.

They broke apart, and Harry grinned at her. "Right, now that we got all that mushiness out of the way. You want to go for a romp in the forest?"

"What? Now?" Ginny asked him as she perched on the arm of the chair she had only recently vacated.

"Why not? Unless you're afraid of getting caught," Harry suggested, cocking an eyebrow at her.

"I wouldn't make a very good Marauder if I was," Ginny said.

"That's what I like to hear. Let me grab my invisibility cloak, then we can sneak down into the forest. Once we're inside, we should be fine to drop the cloak and transform. From there it's all fun and games."

"You sound like you've done this before," Ginny replied playfully.

"You might say that," Harry returned with a grin. "Let's go."

A/N: Well thus ends the chapter. For discussions on the story, update notices, and the Teaserette Guessing Game, you can join my Yahoo Group at [www dot groups dot yahoo dot com slash group slash fakeasmile](http://www.dot.groups.yahoo.com/group/fakeasmile). I apologize, but they will not actually allow me to post the URL here. You can find a link to the group on my bio page.

Chapter 14: Yuletide Fun

The last couple weeks of term flew by relatively quickly. Before he knew it, Harry realized that there was only one week left in the term and less than two weeks before Christmas. He still had the majority of his Christmas shopping to do, so that Saturday Harry made his trip into Diagon Alley.

He left shortly after breakfast wanting to give himself as much time as possible. He had a lot to accomplish in that one trip, and he wanted to make sure he had enough time for everything. Walking the streets in disguise, Harry entered practically every store on the alley. If not for his magical trunk, he would have been overburdened with his purchases in no time. All morning long he moved from shop to shop, talking to store clerks, looking at items, buying this, asking about that...it was exhausting. As it began to approach midday, Harry decided he needed a break from all of it. He wracked his brain for ideas of what he could do to get away for a bit when it hit him.

He went through the Leaky Cauldron and out the exit into Muggle London. There was a payphone not far down the road, and Harry swiftly made his way over to it. He cast some privacy charms around himself as he took out his trunk and dug out a small card that he had not seen since the summer. He dialed the number on it. The phone rang several times before it went to a message. Not home.

His shoulders slumped slightly, but he was not deterred. Knowing only one place to look for her, he set off for the department store where he had first met Jessica over the summer. Lady luck was with him that day, for as soon as he walked in he spied Jessica ringing up a customer. He waited until she was finished before approaching.

“Pardon me, but you wouldn’t be able to help me pick out an entirely new wardrobe, would you?” Harry asked her.

She spun around fast. “Harry!” she all but screamed with a wide smile stretching across her face. She leapt at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He caught her around the waist and laughed at her reaction.

“It’s good to see you too,” he drawled.

“How long have you been in London? Will you be here for long? Why didn’t you call and let me know?” she asked in rapid succession as she released him from her tight embrace.

“Let’s see,” Harry said ponderingly. “I just got in this morning; I won’t be here but a day, and I didn’t call because I didn’t think I’d have the time to meet you. Obviously I was mistaken on the last bit. I found myself with a bit of extra time and in need of a welcome break, so I called you. When you didn’t answer, I knew of only one place to look for you.”

“So you came all the way over here just on the off chance that I’d be working?” she asked. Harry nodded with a sheepish grin. “That’s so sweet, Harry. It’s so great to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Harry returned. “I do actually have a bit of clothes shopping to do, and I’m also in need of a nice lunch. Think you could help me out?”

“The clothes, definitely,” she said with a smile. “And I get an hour break for lunch, but that doesn’t start for another hour yet.”

“Well let’s get started on the shopping, and if need be, I can meet you back here when you get off. That is, of course, if you’d like to get lunch,” Harry added.

“Of course I would,” she said in mock exasperation. “Well come on then; let’s find you some new clothes.”

She led him up to the men’s department, asking Harry what he needed. He told her he needed some thicker clothes for the winter months, especially some workout clothes he could wear in the cold weather, and some new shirts. He explained that some of the ones he had bought last summer seemed to have shrunk. She raised an amused eyebrow at him at that.

“Somehow I don’t think it’s the fault of the shirts,” she commented lightly.

“Well of course not,” Harry replied obtusely. “They can’t exactly shrink themselves, can they? They must have shrunk in the wash or something.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said with an impish grin. “Have you been keeping up with your workouts?”

Harry nodded dumbly, not understanding where she was going with that line of questioning. “Yeah, I run and workout every morning. Why?”

“Because it’s not the shirts shrinking, you’re just getting bigger,” she told him. “Honestly, after months of working out on a daily basis, what did you expect? I could feel it when you hugged me, and I could see it the moment I first took a good look at you.”

Harry ducked his head and scuffed his trainers on the ground, completely caught off guard at her comments. “Still modest, I see,” she said sweetly.

Harry looked up at her at that and gave her a small smirk. “Well I do try,” he said in an effort to regain some of his composure.

They spent the next forty-five minutes collecting a variety of new clothes to add to Harry’s wardrobe. Since Jessica had to stick around for another fifteen minutes before she could take her lunch break, they wandered around the store together for another ten or so minutes before heading for the register. After ringing him up, Jessica had to duck into the back to punch out.

When she came back out she smiled at Harry and asked, “So what do you want to do for lunch?”

Harry mulled that over for a moment. “I don’t know; I could go for anything. What about you? Is there anything in particular you want?”

She was quiet in thought for a moment. "I think I could really go for just a salad or a sandwich or something."

"That works for me," Harry immediately inserted. "Err, do you know of any place nearby that would work?"

"Yep, there's a place a few blocks away if you don't mind the walk."

"Not at all." The two set off. They talked a little about school during their walk. Jessica told him about the classes she was taking. She really liked her Literature teacher and was really enjoying the class, but her Chemistry teacher was an absolute monster. Harry snickered at that. Potions was not that far off from Chemistry.

Harry talked about school as well at her prompting, though the details were changed a bit. Harry also could not stand his Science teacher. He told her that the man had it out for him right from the start. He mentioned that his father and he had been rivals back when they attended the same school many years in the past and how he liked to make snide comments about both Harry and his father.

Jessica reacted as expected. She was outraged that a teacher would displace his anger at Harry's father onto Harry himself, especially with a grudge that old and with Harry's father being dead for fifteen years. "How they can let a man like that teach is beyond me," she summed up.

"You'll hear no argument from me," Harry responded. The conversation turned to brighter topics after that, as they finally made it to Cid's Deli. They quickly ordered: Jessica a Chicken Caesar Salad, Harry a Ham and Turkey with Swiss. Harry told her about the houses at his school and how each had a teacher as its Head. He explained all about Professor McGonagall and how, despite her stern exterior, he had become much closer to her this year, seeing her outside the classroom and even developing a bit of a friendship with her. When Jessica needled him for more information, he let slip about his dancing lessons with her, which in turn led to conversation about the upcoming ball.

Jessica was especially interested in hearing about his date to the ball. "What's her name? What's she look like? Is she nice? Do you like her? Are you going as friends or more than that? Tell me about her."

Harry barely had time to respond in between each of her questions. He told her a bit about Ginny. She was his best mate's little sister who had a bit of a crush on him several years back. They had recently become best friends, and he trusted her more than he had ever trusted anyone else.

Jessica asked several times about his feelings for Ginny, but Harry steadfastly maintained that she was his best friend. After they finished their meal, Harry walked her back to the department store. When they reached the doors, he turned to her and said, "It was great to see you again. Thank you so much for your help with the shopping." He lifted up the bags still in his arms.

"It was my pleasure. Thanks for lunch and for stopping by. It was quite a pleasant surprise," she told him in return. She wrapped her arms around him in a hug, which he returned. After a moment she released him and began to back up, though she did not fully release him until she had leaned back in to give him a peck on the cheek. "Keep in touch, Harry."

"I'll do that. Bye Jessica," he said with a small wave as she began to back up towards the doors.

"Bye Harry," she said as she returned the wave before turning herself around and walking back into the store. He only let his gaze linger on her for but a moment. Realising that he had wasted enough time already, he resumed his shopping. He had a couple stops to make in muggle London, including picking something out for Mr. Weasley for Ginny. Knowing her father's obsession for all things muggle, she wanted to buy something from the muggle world for him. Unable to do so herself, she enlisted Harry's help.

Harry was only too happy to offer his services. He had planned to make a stop in muggle London anyway, so it was really no inconvenience to him. When he asked her what he should get for her

dad, Ginny did not have much of an idea of what to buy. She said that something electrical would be good, preferably something that used batteries. Harry was pleasantly surprised to hear her get all the terminology correctly. She did not seem to take after the rest of her family in that regard.

Harry picked up a couple small, battery-operated appliances for her to give to her father. He made his own muggle purchases rather quickly then returned to Diagon Alley to finish off the rest of his shopping. By the time he had finished, it was nearing supper time at Hogwarts, so he hurried back to the castle to get in before anyone became too suspicious of his absence. Luckily, most students were entirely too preoccupied with homework to notice much of anything as their professors were cramming in as much as they could before the end of term. His absence for the entire day went virtually unnoticed.

After dinner, Harry and Ginny retired to his office. They had not spent much time together in the last couple weeks. Ginny's classes were putting a strain on her as her professors were piling work on top of the fifth years in preparation for the OWLs in the Spring. Without their animagus lessons, there was not a specific reason for them to meet regularly in private. A week ago, they had renewed some of the pranks on Draco and set up some new ones, but beyond that they had only really seen each other in passing or in the crowded Common Room.

After they settled in, she asked him about his day of shopping, so Harry began to give her a rundown of his day. He told her that it had been quite a long day, but he was happy because he had found everything he needed. He told her that he was especially excited to see her reaction to the gift he had chosen for her. Truth be told, he was both excited and nervous. He had spent much more money than he intended, but he had been offered a deal that he could not refuse.

She, of course, tried to needle him for more information about her gift, but she may as well have been interrogating the wall. Harry refused to give her any hints about it. Finally giving up, she asked him about the rest of his time away from the castle. Harry told her that he had quickly found himself burning out from all the shopping and about his decision to ask Jessica out for lunch.

Ginny became noticeably quiet and distracted at that point, but Harry continued on with his story. He was not quite sure what was bothering her, but he could tell that something he had said had struck her. When he told her that he had bought a couple muggle electronics for her to give to her father, Ginny did not react. Harry decided that was quite enough. He leaned far forward in his chair and snapped his fingers directly in front of her eyes.

Ginny jumped out of her seat while swatting his hand away. "What was that for?" she practically yelled at him.

"You were off in your own little world," Harry replied calmly. "You haven't heard a word I've said for the past few minutes."

Her mouth formed the shape of an, "Oh," though she did not actually say the word. "Sorry," she said after a short moment of silence. She reseated herself.

"It's okay," Harry replied with a shrug. "What were you thinking about?"

"Huh?"

"When you were spacing out on me," Harry answered. "What were you thinking about?"

"Oh," she said rather more loudly than was necessary as a light blushed suffused her cheeks. "Nothing, really."

After seeing her reaction, Harry was even more interested in what exactly she was thinking about. "Not nothing," Harry said. "Come on, what were you thinking about?"

"It was nothing, Harry," she insisted. "So what did I miss then? How was Jessica?"

"She was good," Harry answered. "It was nice to see her again..."

“But...?” Ginny prodded, sensing Harry had more to say on the subject.

“I dunno,” Harry answered. “It’s just that I hadn’t really thought much about her at all over the past few months; I don’t know what I expected. We had only gone out that one time last summer, and we decided to stay friends. It was the right decision to make. I knew that then, and I still know it now.”

“But you still have feelings for her,” Ginny supplied a bit sullenly.

“No,” Harry answered without batting an eye. “I really don’t; that’s the thing. It didn’t feel the same. There was something missing, like a...uh...”

“Spark?” Ginny asked.

“Yes! That’s it exactly. There was just nothing there. Don’t get me wrong, I still enjoyed seeing her and catching up, but there was just nothing there.”

Ginny perked up noticeably after that point when Harry again told her that he had picked up a couple small electronics for her to give to her father. She thanked him profusely for it and promised to pay him back as soon as she could. Harry just shrugged indifferently. He did not care about the money. He would neither try to stop her from paying him back, nor would he hound her for it.

“Were Hermione or Ron asking about me?” he asked her with a bit of dread.

“They did wonder where you were all day,” she replied. “But I don’t think they gave it too much thought. By now they’re used to you disappearing on them, and they were too busy with schoolwork to pay it too much mind.”

Harry let out a relieved sigh. “That’s good to hear.”

“I’m guessing you haven’t told them anything yet,” she said neutrally.

He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair. "It's not like I haven't thought about it," he said. "I just don't know what to tell them. If Hermione got an inkling of what I've really been up to, she'd run to Dumbledore without a second thought. I hate having to keep things from her and Ron, but I have to. She could easily ruin everything I've been working so hard for."

"I know, Harry," Ginny soothed. "I told you that I know why you're doing what you're doing, and I agree with your reasoning. But there has to be something you can give them that won't give away anything important. Just think about it and look for something you can share with them. Even if it is something small at first, every little bit will help."

Harry looked up and met her gaze. "I know. And thanks." They were quiet for a long moment before Harry brought up something he had been thinking about for quite some time. "Gin?"

"Hmm?"

"Remember after you transformed for the first time, we joked about how our time training together was ending, and I said I was sure I could find something else to teach you?" he asked her tentatively.

"Yes," she replied attentively.

"Well there's something I want to teach you, if you're willing to learn," Harry told her carefully.

"Okay," she said, drawing the word out. "What is it that you want to teach me?"

"Occlumency," Harry said simply, watching her intently for her reaction. He was actually rather nervous about how receptive she would be to the idea. She knew more about him and his secrets than anyone else, and she had no means of protecting that knowledge from prying minds. It was not safe for her to know what she knew

without being able to keep that information secret from a practiced Legilimens.

It was a selfish request on his part. He wanted to protect his secrets as best he could, and that would require making sure Ginny could protect them as well as he. Plus, a large part of him wanted to tell her even more. The prophecy still weighed down on him. Apart from Sirius, Harry did not have anyone else he could talk to about it. As reassuring as it was to have Sirius to talk to, Harry could not help but wish he had someone else, someone his age, someone there for him who could understand and support him when Harry felt overwhelmed. He knew there was only one person he could turn to for that.

He watched that person as she digested his request. Her face had first registered shock. She was unprepared for the request, not that Harry could blame her for that. She had then turned more thoughtful and reflective. She was considering it and probably working out the reason for his request. As the silence stretched on, Harry began to grow more nervous. This was very important to him. He desperately hoped that she would concede to it, but he was prepared to convince her, if he had to, by any means necessary.

Just then, Ginny looked back towards him. "This is important to you," she stated more than asked. Harry nodded his head. "When do we start?"

Harry smiled. "You'll do it, then?" he asked in a mixture of hope and disbelief.

"Yes," she replied simply. "I know you wouldn't ask me to learn it if it wasn't important, both to you and to everything you're doing. If I am the only one that knows what you've been up to, then it's obviously important that I have a way of protecting that knowledge." Harry nodded fervently. "And something tells me that there is a lot more to the story than you've been telling me." Harry again nodded, though with much less energy. "I thought as much. That's good enough for me."

“We don’t have to start right away,” Harry said. “I know you’re going to be busy this last week of classes, and I don’t want to get in the way of that. But if you’re willing, we can get started over the holidays.”

“That sounds fair,” she told him.

After a short moment of silence, Harry leaned forward and plucked one of Ginny’s hands off her knees and into his own. “Thank you, Ginny,” he told her earnestly and emotionally, looking her directly in the eyes.

She gave his hand a slight squeeze. “You’ve no need to thank me, Harry. You’re the one that’s going to be teaching me a very useful and valuable skill. I should be thanking you.”

OoOoO

The next morning, Harry received a letter from Fred and George over breakfast. Noticing whom it was from based on the handwriting and ink colour, Harry tucked the letter into his robes and went to resume his eating. He was interrupted, however, by an inquisitive voice.

“Aren’t you going to read your letter?” Hermione asked him.

Harry looked up at her. “Yes, I was planning on reading it later.”

“Who’s it from?” she queried.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Hermione that it was none of her business when he remembered what Ginny had told him. Even something small and seemingly insignificant could do a world of good. He let out a breath then looked back up at Hermione. “Fred and George,” he answered.

Her eyebrows rose nearly into her hairline, but it was Ron who responded first. “What’re they doing writing to you?”

“They’ve been writing me once a month about their store. They tell me how it’s going and give me an earnings report,” Harry explained.

“Why’s that?” Ron asked.

“Because they made me part owner of the shop,” Harry replied uneasily, fearful of an explosion from his friend.

“Oh,” Ron said. He looked like he wanted to say something else but instead returned to his breakfast.

“So that’s all they write to you about then?” Hermione prodded.

Harry sighed again. “Not exactly,” he told her. “That’s how it began, but now they give me a report on a side project they’re working on.”

Hermione’s eyebrows did reach her hairline this time. Ron’s attention left his breakfast for the second time that morning, a rare feat, and again focused on Harry. Neville also leaned in, clearly interested in the conversation. Beside him, Ginny reached under the table and gave Harry’s knee a comforting squeeze. When he turned toward her, she gave him a reassuring smile and a nod, giving him the encouragement he needed to go on.

“And what project is that?” Hermione asked. Her voice had dropped down in volume. She obviously sensed that this was not something he wanted the average person to hear about. For her discretion, he was grateful.

“A couple months back, Dumbledore made a comment that the twins had been trying to get in the Order but that he was still reluctant to let them in since they’re so young...just out of school. You know the drill. I got to thinking that he was vastly underestimating them. They weren’t so hot in school, but they really are quite brilliant. They just chose to focus on less conventional topics of study.”

Hermione scowled at that but thankfully remained silent.

Harry continued, “I got to thinking that if given the proper motivation and a push in the right direction, they could be a huge help in the war. What have they been doing the past few years but inventing? Sure,

all their inventions have been for the purposes of pranking, but that doesn't take away from their brilliance. Just imagine if you could take that same creative genius and turn it towards the war effort."

He paused to give them a chance to process what he had said so far. After a moment Hermione spoke up. "So you've what...given them a push in the right direction?"

"You can say that," Harry said with a small smirk. "I gave them an idea. If they wanted to get into the Order, they would most likely have to earn their places. I had a couple ideas of items they could develop and present to Dumbledore in exchange for their admittance into the Order. I figure the ideas I gave them will only be a start. Once they get into it, their creativity will take over, and the Death Eaters won't know what hit them."

Ron was staring at him with his mouth agape. Hermione had turned pensive as she no doubt imagined the anarchy the twins would spread amongst the ranks of Death Eaters. Neville, meanwhile, grinned evilly. "That's brilliant," he said. "As much as I hated being the butt of their jokes, I can't deny that they were good. Very good."

Hermione looked back at him. "So what's in it for you then?" she asked him.

Harry shrugged. "I hadn't really thought about it. Then again, it might be nice to have them in my debt."

"You mean even further in your debt," Ron amended. "Don't forget the only reason they have a shop right now is the money you gave them."

Harry could only nod in return.

"You said this was a couple months ago?" Hermione asked. Harry nodded, dreading her response. "So why haven't you brought it up beforehand? Why keep it from us?"

"I don't know," Harry replied uncomfortably. "I didn't think it was all that important. I didn't even know if anything would come of it. I would have brought it up when I had more to go on"

"You still could have told us," Hermione continued. "Ginny obviously knew already." She shot Ginny a withering glance as she said this. "If it was important enough to tell her, then why not us?"

"Ginny is my best friend," Harry replied, trying not to let himself get agitated. "She was with me when I sent them the owl with the idea."

"So what are we then?" Hermione demanded hotly, her voice rising in volume. "We used to be your best friends! Why are you pushing us away? Why are you keeping secrets from us?"

"I hardly think this is the time or the place for this, Hermione," a downtrodden Harry replied. The conversation was not going at all like he had hoped.

Hermione huffed irritably. "Right, and I'm sure you'll be going out of your way to set up the proper time and place," Hermione pushed scathingly. "Because your friends are so high on your list of priorities."

"Fine," Harry spat out, giving into his emotions. "You want to know the truth?" Without waiting for a reply he trudged on. "If you spent a little less time trying to pry all the painful details of my life out of me and actually treated me like a person instead of just another subject for you to obsess over, maybe I would have told you before now. As it is, you've done nothing all term long but hound and badger me to talk about Sirius with you, to open up and spill all the dirty little secrets in my life. You seem to think you're the only one who can save me. Let me ask you this: why do you think you can save me?"

His voice turned steely as he continued on, his eyes boring straight into Hermione's. "How do you think you can even begin to understand what I've been going through? Who have you lost? Who have you seen murdered right before your eyes? When have you ever felt the guilt of knowing that you played a large part in getting someone you

love killed? Answer me that, Hermione. Just because I wasn't talking to you about it, doesn't mean I wasn't talking to anyone. What do you think I was doing with Remus when I met him over the summer, or in our letters? And Ginny as well?"

"They've been there. They know what it's like. I've talked to them about it, and I'm okay now. I still miss Sirius. I still wish things had turned out differently. That will never change, but I'm not broken. I don't need you to fix me. Frankly, the fact that you've been so relentless in your pursuits to help me—" Harry spat the words out "—just goes to show how little you understand what I've been going through. Every time you pushed you just gave me more and more reasons to withhold things from you. Instead of asking me why I didn't tell you sooner, ask yourself why I should have."

Harry stood abruptly. He stepped over the bench and set off for the double doors with a long stride, his robes billowing menacingly behind him.

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Hermione made as if to rise and follow him, but Ginny stopped her. "Sit down, Hermione." The bushy-haired girl sank back into her seat though she looked rather mutinous. "You've done quite enough damage already because you haven't stopped to think about your actions. How do you think I've felt the past few months with you accusing me of trying to take advantage of Harry? You act as if you're the only one who cares about him and is trying to help, but you're the one causing the most damage. You can't even begin to imagine what you've put him through for the past few months. There are so few people in his life that he feels he can trust, and every day you give him more reasons not to trust you. Sit and think about that."

With that, Ginny stood and swiftly exited the hall. Not wanting to repeat her past mistakes, Ginny set off for the Room of Requirement at a jog. She passed a couple of stray students on the way. They gawked at her but moved out of her way without protest. She was surprised when she came into the corridor with the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy to find Harry standing in the hallway holding a door open.

She stopped in her tracks momentarily, spurring Harry to ask, "Are you coming or not?" His tone was flat and did nothing to give away his emotions.

Ginny nodded and smiled at Harry as she walked towards him and through the open door. Harry followed in afterwards, shutting the door behind him. Ginny spun around to face him. "You waited for me," she half asked, half stated in surprise.

Harry shrugged. "Last time I stormed out of the Great Hall, you followed after me and got locked out." He looked down at his trainers and scuffed his shoe on the stone floor. "I thought you might follow me again."

"You thought right," Ginny said with a smile. "Hermione was all set to run after you, but I made her sit back down and told her to think long and hard about what you said."

"Thanks," Harry said gratefully. "I don't think I could have quite taken another argument with her right now."

Ginny nodded. "Hopefully Hermione will take the time to really process what you said and cool down before she tries to track you down. If she doesn't, things will probably only get uglier."

Harry ran both his hands through his hair and pulled out slightly at the sides in frustration. "I know. I tried, Ginny," he said, looking up at her. He began pacing back and forth in front of her as he continued. "At first I was just going to tell her the letter was none of her business, but then I remembered what you said. That wasn't so significant that it had to be kept secret, so I tried. But..."

Ginny stepped in front of Harry as he turned in his pacing, stopping him in his tracks. "I know, Harry," she said soothingly, taking his face into her hands to force him to meet her gaze. "I was there, remember? I know that you're trying. That's all you can do. It takes more than one person for a friendship to work. Hermione needs to be

willing to meet you halfway. You've made the first step; now all you can do is wait to see if she'll match it."

Harry nodded in her hands, and Ginny saw him deflate before her eyes. His anger and frustration melted away to reveal weariness and fatigue. He was, quite literally, physically tired of fighting with her. Ginny profusely thanked the room in her mind when a sofa appeared behind Harry. She gently guided him down into it, and sat herself down right next to him.

Harry stared straight ahead, but when Ginny gave his leg a slight squeeze just above his knee, Harry reached out and grabbed her hand, giving her a squeeze in return. Sensing his need for comfort, Ginny lifted his hand with hers and swung his arm around her shoulders. She looked up at him, and he finally turned his head and looked down at her. He gave her the smallest smile and squeezed her shoulder, drawing her in closer to him. That was all the encouragement she needed to burrow her way further into him, using the side of his chest as her pillow.

They did not speak; there was no need. Nothing she could say would make him feel any better, and it certainly could not fix the situation for him. He did not need platitudes or false promises. He just needed to know that she was there for him. Even if he did not realise the need in himself, she saw it. As strong and independent as he was, Harry had spent too much time alone. All that time with the Dursleys was sure to leave its scars on him.

In the past, Ron and Hermione had been his lifelines. They were the ones he focused on when things got rough. They were his hope at a better life. She knew that it could not be easy for him to watch as that bond slipped away through his grasp. There was nothing she could do to help that. The three of them needed to come to terms on their own. All she could do was offer her own support and love, and that was one thing she knew she would never stop doing.

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Several hours later and after a private lunch, Harry and Ginny ventured back to Gryffindor Tower. Ginny had a lot of work to do, and

Harry could not deny that he too needed to get some work done. The two strolled into the Common Room and, as unobtrusively as possible, made their way over to an empty table in the corner of the room. They were not sitting for two minutes when Harry felt someone approach them from behind.

After a long moment, the presence spoke. "Harry, can we talk?"

Harry sighed, his suspicions on who it was confirmed. "Sure, Hermione," he said, only slightly twisting himself around so that he was still not entirely facing her. She pulled out the chair on his right and took a seat. She just sat there for a moment looking down at the table, prompting Harry to turn himself towards her and arch an eyebrow as he waited for her to start. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ginny sitting across from him eyeing Hermione warily.

Without lifting her head, Hermione began speaking. "I'm sorry." She let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry for pushing you so much. I just felt like you were shutting me out, and I was worried you were shutting everyone out. I just didn't think that you'd talk to anyone else about it."

His eyes were still boring into her bushy hair. "Hermione look at me." She did not move for a long second, but she finally, slowly, brought her head up to meet his gaze. "I hardly even know where to start. I've told you countless times that I was fine and handling everything okay, but you never once believed me. You never once trusted me to be able to take care of myself, and you assumed that I needed you to pick up the pieces of my life. You have, on a daily basis, hammered in just how little trust and respect you have for me."

She shook her head sending her hair flailing. "Harry, I..."

"Just stop, Hermione," Harry said, holding a hand up to forestall her attempt. "You can't deny that you had absolutely no trust that I'd be able to handle Sirius's death without your help. And trying to do so is only going to make things worse here." Harry saw Ginny nodding her head out of the corner of his eye. He was thankful for the silent show of support. "The saddest part is that I have no idea why you've felt like I needed your help so much. Have I given you even one reason

all term long for you to suspect that I was depressed or hiding my true feelings?”

“You were so distant,” Hermione answered. “I just assumed...”

“I was distant because I didn’t want to talk to you about Sirius,” Harry interrupted. “And that’s all you were interested in. We could hardly hold a conversation without you bringing it up or oh so subtly opening up a book about dealing with grief right in front of my eyes. Plus, I’ve been taking my studies much more seriously this year. That’s one thing I thought you’d understand. I’ve been doing a lot of reading and homework in my office, and I’ve been reading up on other topics to help prepare for my HA classes. Despite what you may think, I take my role as an Assistant Professor very seriously.”

Harry got a small bit of pleasure seeing her wince at that comment. “I’m sorry, Harry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just we were in the middle of the Great Hall and anyone could have heard...”

“What about every other time?” Harry asked incredulously. “That’s not the first time you’ve gotten on my case about it. Every time I show up a few minutes late for the regular curfew, you jump on my case about it and accuse me of abusing my position.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione said dejectedly. “I guess I haven’t been the best friend to you lately.”

“You have to know, Hermione, that it wasn’t my intention to put any distance between us,” Harry told her honestly. “But there are some things I just don’t feel comfortable talking to you about. Had you allowed me the time and space to come to you on my own, perhaps that would have changed. Every time you pushed me, you only reinforced my decision not to come to you. Had you at all understood where I was coming from or what I was feeling, you would have known that you couldn’t push me into talking. I know you only wanted to help, but you have to understand that you can’t always help everyone, and trying to force your help on others is only going to make things worse.” Harry was tempted to bring up the House Elves

and S.P.E.W., but he figured now was probably not the best time given the tentative ground their friendship was on.

He shook those thoughts out of his head and focused back on the topic at hand. "You have a tendency to want to always be in control of every situation. You've been doing it for years with Ron and me. Any time we study together you take charge. Any time we're trying to solve some problem, you take charge. But you can't just expect me to lie down and let you take control of my life. You have to respect me enough to be able to let me make my own decisions, and when I tell you to drop something or that I don't want to talk about something, I need you to respect that. You're supposed to be my sister, not my mother or my professor, but you treat me like I'm a little kid who needs to be told what to do all the time."

Hermione was nodding her head very slowly. It was clear that she was at least trying to take in everything he was saying. "I'm not asking for that much, Hermione," Harry said after a long moment of silence. "Just for you to treat me as an equal."

"You really think I treat you like a child?" she asked him tentatively.

"Yes," Harry replied candidly. "To be honest, you always have in a way. It didn't bother me as much in the past because I knew you were right most of the time. When you pushed Ron and me to study more or do our homework, I always knew you were right, but the distinction is that I chose to follow your advice, not your orders. You can't tell me what to do, Hermione. Give me suggestions if you'd like, but then you need to accept it if I choose not to follow your advice. I need to know that you're willing to let me live my own life."

"I – I'll try," Hermione told him earnestly. "I never meant to try to control you; I just..." she trailed off ponderingly.

"Got used to me following orders?" Harry asked her.

"No!" Hermione declared, shaking her head fervently. "It's not that, it's just...I wanted to help you. Last June you were just so distraught, and you were isolating yourself; I promised myself that I wouldn't let

you go through it alone. I know you, Harry. And I've seen you always trying to bear your burdens on your own. You never ask for help. I wasn't going to just sit back and watch you struggle through this on your own."

"But if you hadn't shut your eyes you would have seen that I wasn't going through it alone," Harry countered. "I appreciate that you wanted to help, Hermione. I really do. But I needed a different kind of help from you. One that you refused to give me time and time again." At her questioning look, he continued. "I just needed my friends, Hermione."

"I'm still your friend, Harry," Hermione stated.

"You sure haven't been acting like it. Between you and Ron, I was ready to go spare this year, and if it wasn't for Ginny, I probably would have." After he said it, he turned and gave her a grateful smile before turning his attention back to Hermione.

She nodded glumly at his pronouncement. "I don't know what else to say."

"Say you'll stop hounding me. Say you'll stop trying to push me to share more than I'm willing to share. Say you'll start treating me with respect and dignity. Say you'll start acting like my friend. You're supposed to be a sister to me; say you'll start acting like it."

Hermione nodded her head marginally. "I think I can do that."

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It was not until much later that evening that Harry actually got around to reading the letter from the twins. Their shop was still doing well, and Harry gleaned from their vague comments that their new side project was coming along nicely. They did not share many details about it due to the sensitive nature of the information and the fear that Death Eaters could intercept the post. Harry sent a reply back to them to, among other things, ask for a small favour, just a little

something that he had thought up to make the Yule Ball a little more memorable for everybody.

While most students had been bogged down with work over the last couple weeks of the term, Harry was still well ahead in most of his classes. The only class that was really taking up a lot of time was Potions, and that was more due to Snape's vindictiveness than any difficulties with the subject matter. Compared to the rest of the student body, however, Harry might as well have already been on vacation. That changed this week.

It was now the beginning of the last week of the term, and even Harry was beginning to feel the effects of the rush of information being laid upon their shoulders before the winter break. Hermione, in particular, looked as though she was about to have a nervous breakdown. The fifth and seventh years all looked quite hassled as well. The teachers were relentless about OWLs his fifth year, and he imagined they would be even worse for NEWTs. But now he was in between the two, the calm before the storm, if you will.

That same statement could be used to describe the war. The Death Eater attacks had begun to taper off a little without any real cause. The Ministry was playing it up as if they had single-handedly stopped several attacks, but in reality, the Death Eaters were just attacking less. Rather than take this as a good sign, Harry took it for what he saw it as: trouble. The Death Eaters would only pull back for a reason, and whatever it was, that reason could not be anything good.

In addition to his own pile of work to do, he also had essays to grade for both Professors McGonagall and Caldwell. The additional work was cutting into his training time this week, but he supposed that missing one or two training sessions would not be the end of the world.

Harry was greatly looking forward to the upcoming break. He hoped that he would get another chance to go out into the forest with Ginny in their feline forms. They had a lot of fun that first night out. Harry did not spend much time in his panther form. He enjoyed flying so much that he usually opted to play around in owl form whenever he got the urge to transform. Plus, that gave him an opportunity to talk to and fly

with Hedwig. While he loved his owl form, it was so much fun to have another animagus to play around with, to chase and wrestle. He finally realized just how much fun the Marauders used to have, and he felt just a little bit closer to his dad and Sirius as a result.

Harry handed McGonagall back a stack of graded second year essays after his Transfiguration class. She accepted them with a smile and a "Thank you." Harry merely smiled back in reply as he ducked off to his office to get to work on a Potions essay he had been putting off for far too long already. Five rolls of parchment on the ingredients of Veritaserum and what each one adds to the potion. Quite an undertaking, especially when it was due in two days.

Lucky for Harry, Veritaserum was one thing he had made sure to read up on over the past summer. Harry knew he was playing with fire, and he knew that he would eventually be found out. He needed to know, therefore, what could be used against him should he be caught. He could not imagine Dumbledore using Veritaserum against him. Snape or the Ministry, however, was entirely different. Dolores Umbridge was proof enough that the Ministry probably would not hesitate to force Veritaserum on him. Voldemort would more likely use torture, if he did not simply kill Harry outright.

So it was only natural that Harry read up about that particular potion. He had heard that it was possible to fight and overcome its effects, so Harry wanted to know how. Granted, he did not learn much to help him in that endeavour. Harry had already read in detail the makeup of the potion, including the key ingredients and what each one adds to the final solution. He had found little information on blocking its effects, yet his scarce discoveries were certainly uplifting. It takes a strong mind to block the effects of Veritaserum, similar to how one can block the Imperius Curse. Harry was already an expert on the latter, having resisted the curse cast by Voldemort himself. Harry hoped that ability would transfer over.

Harry immediately set to work upon entering his office. He would be able to at least begin the essay from memory, and he had all the references he needed in his own personal library. At least he did not need to do actual research for this one. He dug out a bottle of ink, a quill, and several rolls of parchment and began writing.

By the time Harry put the quill down to run down to the Great Hall for lunch, his hand was cramping up on him. The quill had barely stopped moving for the past hour and a half as Harry worked on writing down everything he knew about the complicated and potent truth serum. As it was, he was half an hour late for the start of lunch and had to eat in a rush to get to Hagrid's class on time.

He decided to completely forgo his training that day to return to his office. He waged an internal debate on his way through the stone hallways of the castle. Should he get back to work on Snape's essay right away? Or should he begin working on those essays for Professor Caldwell? He eventually decided to start with the former. If he needed a break from that at any point, then he could switch over to the latter.

He skipped his training again the next day to finish up the essay. He was a little bothered at missing two training sessions in a row, but he was still running and working out in the mornings, so he did not think the respite would affect him too much. He was able to finish the essay up relatively early that evening and was pretty pleased with his work. He doubted he would receive good marks on it, but he attributed that more to Snape's bias than the quality of his work.

Harry and Hermione were among the first to enter into Snape's classroom after lunch the next day. The rest of the class piled in shortly after. Harry was just pulling out his essay when he heard the door open and looked into the back of the classroom. A smile lit up his face at what he saw. It was Malfoy. That alone was not what brought the smile, however. Malfoy had walked in with the rolls of parchment for his essay in hand, something that Harry had noticed he did on occasion, something that he had planned for.

When he and Ginny had recently renewed a bunch of the pranks throughout the school, Harry had added one particular prank he felt was worthy of Ginny, the twins, or even the Marauders on their best days. He was about to watch it play out.

Not a moment after Malfoy had made it to his seat—he was the last one to enter the class—Snape called for everyone to hand in their

essays. He walked down the row of work tables collecting them. When he got to Malfoy, however, he stopped walking. "What is the meaning of this, Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy looked up at him in annoyance. "The meaning of what, exactly?"

"This," Snape drawled, shoving the parchment back into Malfoy's hands. "In case you had forgotten, I asked for five rolls of parchment on Veritaserum."

"That's what I gave you," Malfoy spat, thrusting the parchment into Snape's face.

"What you gave me," Snape snarled, pushing Malfoy's hands down, "are five rolls of blank parchment."

Malfoy stopped trying to push the parchment back into Snape's hands and took a good look at them. He gasped. "That's not possible. I spent hours researching and working on this. I had all five rolls of parchment completely filled. It's them again. It has to be."

"What nonsense are you sputtering about now? Who is this them you speak of?" Snape demanded.

"Can I talk to you in your office for a moment?" Malfoy requested, shifting uncomfortably. Harry smirked. The last he had checked the map, another of the underwear shrinking charms had been close to activating. If he was not mistaken, Malfoy was currently dealing with more than one prank.

Snape did not look pleased, but he acquiesced to the request, leading Malfoy to the door behind his desk on the right-hand side of the wall. Not wanting to miss any of the excitement, Harry very discretely lifted his left hand and cast a spell at the door. Along with his research of privacy spells, Harry had read about different spells that could be used to eavesdrop or spy on others. He had not necessarily planned on using that knowledge, but it was good to

know what could be used against him. Now he was very glad for the additional research.

He had charmed the door so that to Snape and Malfoy inside the room, it would appear perfectly normal. To those in the classroom, however, it appeared as though the door had completely disappeared. Not only could they see straight through the opening, they could also hear what was going on in the other room as well. Harry made sure to act as surprised as the rest of the class at the door's sudden disappearance. No one did more than whisper about it to their neighbors, however. They were all interested in what was going on in the other room, even the other Slytherins.

"What's this about?" Snape asked shortly. He was clearly annoyed at being interrupted from class.

"Pranks," Malfoy said wearily. "Every day, I get hit with a ton of pranks. This is just another of them; I'm sure of it. I just finished that essay in the library and came straight to class. I had it in my hands the entire time. No one could have taken it, but they must have charmed my ink or something to make it disappear. I don't know, but I'm sure it was them."

"Do you have any ideas as to who is doing this to you?" Snape asked skeptically.

Malfoy's shoulders drooped. "I don't have any proof, if that's what you mean. But I know Potter or those blood-traitor Weasleys are involved."

Snape cocked an eyebrow at that. "And what evidence do you have about these pranks?"

"You think I would make this up?" Malfoy demanded incredulously. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't pretend to understand how the teenage mind works," Snape drawled. "But I have absolutely no proof that you've been under

attack from any pranksters. For all I know this could be some elaborate scheme to get out of writing this essay."

"Proof?" Malfoy asked. "You want proof?" he repeated, his voice taking on a somewhat hysterical quality. "I'll give you your proof." With that Malfoy flung his robes over his head. Snape's eyes bulged out, and the man froze as he watched his student disrobe in front of him. As Malfoy undid the buckle of his belt and it became clear what was coming next, Snape's face changed from shock to abject horror. The only emotion Harry had ever seen Snape lose himself to was anger. Harry knew that the look on Snape's face would be a memory he would cherish for a long time.

Harry watched transfixed as Malfoy pants dropped to his ankles. "Would you look at this?" he screamed, gesturing to his dwindling drawers. "This is the sixth time this has happened! And it always hits me when I don't have time to run back and change. Do you have any idea how uncomfortable it is to sit through class like this?"

Harry never thought he would ever see the day Snape was reduced to spluttering, but that is exactly what the man was doing. After a long moment he was able to regain some of his cognitive faculties, and he rounded on Malfoy. "Get the hell out of my office!" he commanded. "Return to your dormitory and just stay there. You're excused from my class." He did not wait to make sure that his orders were followed. He strode to the door to the classroom and threw it open. As he walked in, he found the entire class staring straight at him, sniggering behind their hands. The beauty of the spell that Harry had used was that it was designed to be used when you wanted to remain unnoticed. As soon as the door was opened, the spell was canceled. All Snape saw when he turned was his office door.

He turned back to face the class and leveled them all with his deadliest glare. "What are you all staring at? Get to work!" He walked over to a shelf on the sidewall and busied himself with some of the ingredients stored there.

"Umm, sir?" one of the Slytherin students bravely spoke up.

"What?" Snape snapped, spinning on his heel and stalking menacingly towards the student.

"Y--You haven't given us our assignment for the day yet," the student continued meekly.

Snape stopped mid-stride. He pointed his wand at the board at the front of the room and instructions appeared. "Get to work. There is no reason for any of you to speak. I want complete silence." He strode back to the shelf and resumed his previous activity without giving the class even a cursory glance. Harry finally looked around and found that he was not the only one struggling to control his mirth. Even Hermione could not fully hide her amusement at what they had just witnessed. She was the only one who had already begun diligently working on the potion, but she did so with an amused smirk. Harry began arranging his ingredients, but his mind was not on the potion. All he could think about at the moment was Ginny. He could not wait to tell her about what had just occurred.

Harry beat a hasty retreat at the end of class. He knew that Ginny was just getting out of Charms class and that they both had the rest of the afternoon open. He wanted to head her off before she made it back to the Common Room. He was unsuccessful in his attempt, but he had no difficulty coaxing her into coming with him to his office. They sat on his sofa together as Harry regaled her with his tale. They shared a long and hearty laugh, reveling in the success they had met in their efforts to make Malfoy suffer for nearly killing Ginny, on top of the numerous other crimes they could attribute to him. The two of them spent the rest of the time until dinner working side by side in comfortable silence. Ginny had schoolwork to do, and Harry needed to grade the essays for Professor Caldwell he had been pushing off for the past few days.

By the time dinner arrived, word of what had happened during their Potions class had spread throughout the school. Naturally the tale became distorted throughout the retellings until half the school thought Malfoy and Snape to be involved in some torrid love affair. Harry and Ginny shared another good laugh when that bit of news reached their ears.

Harry had missed his daily training session for the past three days. Due to his continued work in the mornings, however, he did not suffer one bit from the break, and he very quickly rolled back into his regular routine. When he was not training or doing work for his classes, Harry was studying through the theory and principles behind Legilimency. If he was going to give Ginny Occlumency lessons, he would need some way to test her shields. Besides that, the subject held great interest for Harry. He had no desire to use Legilimency on anyone, except perhaps his foes, but he was still decidedly interested in how that branch of magic worked. He also surmised that knowing how Legilimency worked would only help him defend against mental assaults.

The last two days of classes were relatively uneventful. On Thursday, Charms class was a brief review before Professor Flitwick let the class out early. Professor McGonagall had a similar idea, spending most of the class in review. She did not, however, dismiss the class early, not that anyone expected her to. She kept them to the bell and told them all to have fun and to study over the break, as if those two concepts belonged in the same sentence. Harry knew that he would be doing plenty of studying over the holidays, just not specifically for his classes.

Harry still met with Dumbledore every Thursday night. Their meetings were generally brief. Dumbledore checked Harry's Occlumency shields, and the two exchanged banter here and there, occasionally touching on something of some seriousness. That night was no different. The Headmaster was unable to break through Harry's shields. Harry asked if he had any other ideas on blocking Voldemort, to which Dumbledore replied that he was still searching, but as of yet had not found anything that would work.

The Headmaster requested that they continue to meet even during the holidays, which Harry agreed to without complaint. He hated to think of Dumbledore as an enemy, but the expression, "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer," sprang to Harry's mind. As long as he was friendly and seemingly open with the old man, no suspicion would be cast on him, so he continued to play the part of the good little boy.

It was not terribly difficult to do. He did not hate Dumbledore. He had his problems with him, but he knew that the old man always did what he thought was best. He just often forgot to consider the fact that he might not always know best, specifically when it came to Harry's life. As Headmaster, he had the right to have some degree of control over Harry's life while he was at Hogwarts. Outside of Hogwarts, he had no legal claim whatsoever. He overlooked that fact on a regular basis.

Harry also placed a lot of blame on the Headmaster for his time spent with the Dursleys. Not only did Dumbledore place him there in the first place, but he abandoned him there to people who hated him. How hard would it have been to check up on him every so often or to set up some sort of monitoring charm?

What bothered him the most was that he was sure that the man knew at least a good deal of what his childhood was like. His first Hogwarts letter was addressed to the Cupboard Under the Stairs, after all. He at least knew that Harry had been living in that cupboard, and if that was not enough to make him step in, it should have at least been enough to pique his interest and keep a close eye on things. He only once ever involved himself directly in affairs in Number 4 Privet Drive, and that was only to keep the Dursleys from kicking Harry out of their house after the Dementor attack on Dudley and Harry.

It seemed that as long as Harry was either with the Dursleys or at Hogwarts, Dumbledore was pretty content to let Harry be and to handle his own problems. This may have bugged Harry when he was stuck at the Dursleys before Hogwarts and every summer since, but now it was a godsend. If the old man was in any way suspicious, Harry had no doubt that he could very easily unravel everything that Harry had been up to this year.

His privacy wards could be broken by a powerful enough wizard. If he wanted to, the Headmaster could easily interrupt one of Harry's training sessions. If he kept a close eye on Harry, he could discover Harry leaving the school grounds. He could also easily discover one or both of Harry's animagus forms with a little effort.

Finally, he could just question Harry's friends, more specifically Ginny. None of the others would be able to give Dumbledore anything of

value, but Ginny could. And he would not have any trouble lifting the thoughts right out of her head if he so desired. Harry did not doubt that the man would perform Legilimency on his friends if he deemed it necessary. There was always a chance that he would only use Ron and Hermione in that capacity, but Harry was not sure he really wanted to take that chance, which was why Harry planned to get started on Ginny's lessons as soon as the break began.

He managed to corral Ginny into his office shortly after dinner on Friday. "I thought now that classes were over, we could get started on your Occlumency training," Harry stated rather directly. "Assuming, of course, you're still willing to let me teach you."

Ginny nodded her approval.

Harry took a deep breath before continuing. "The first step you should take is to organize your mind. You have to go through all your thoughts and memories and organize and store them by categories. In my mind, I store my thoughts into several different trunks to help categorize everything. You leave all your inconsequential thoughts like what you had for dinner or your favorite colour or other stuff like that out in the open.

"After you have everything sorted, then you work on building protections. You build walls or set up wards around your mind. I also put locks and wards on my trunks so that if anyone breaks into my mind, all they get are the inconsequential thoughts. The hope is that you'll be able to expel any intruders before they would manage to break into the trunks to get at the meaningful memories.

"I have a book that will explain it much better than that which I will lend to you. Once your protections are in place, I'll have to try to break through them. I've already begun reading up on Legilimency. I'll be teaching myself that as I teach you Occlumency, so I'm not sure how well it will work, but I think it's worth a shot. I was able to protect my mind fairly well over the summer without anyone to test me or teach me."

Ginny sat back in her chair as she thought over everything she had just been told. "So you'd be trying to break into my mind to read my thoughts and memories?"

"Yes and no," Harry replied. "I would be trying to break into your mind, but I'm not going to try to read your thoughts or look through your memories. I'm not Snape. If I get in, I'll let myself be pushed right back out."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully. "All right."

"I should warn you; organizing your mind can be quite difficult. You'll be forced to relive all of your memories, good and bad," Harry told her seriously, thinking of her first year at Hogwarts with Tom Riddle's diary.

Ginny must also have been thinking along those lines as she gulped audibly. She was quiet for a long minute before finally asking in a small voice, "You had to relive all your memories?"

Harry nodded somewhat uncomfortably, reminded of how painful that experience was.

"And you did that this past summer?" Ginny continued.

"Yeah."

"Alone?"

"For the most part."

"Even after everything that happened?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"It had to be done," Harry replied simply. "It was tough, of course, but it was something that I needed to do. I think I'm better for it. It helps you to confront your past, and it also helps a lot for school. You can remember things much more easily because your mind is so organized. But I won't lie to you; it will be extremely difficult."

"Okay," she replied easily.

You do realize that you'll have to relive all your memories, even from your first year." She nodded slowly. "And that I'll be trying to break into your mind?"

"Harry, are you trying to convince me not to go through with it or something?" she cried in exasperation, but her smile ruined the effect.

"I just want to make sure you know what you're getting yourself into," Harry told her honestly.

"Harry," she said, leaning forward and looking him straight in the eyes. "This is obviously important to you, so it's important to me too. If you think I need to learn Occlumency, that's enough for me. You're not exactly the type of person to ask for things of other people needlessly, and you're definitely not going to take advantage of the situation. I trust you."

"Well, thank you, then," Harry replied, a bit taken aback.

"You're welcome." Ginny leaned back in her chair. "So I get to start with some reading then?"

"Yeah," he said with a nod as he walked over to his bookshelf to retrieve the aforementioned book. He walked back and handed it to her. "I suggest you read that before anything else. It helped me out a lot. I learned more after reading that book for just five minutes than I did with Snape all of last year, which doesn't actually say much, but trust me when I say that it's a very good place to start."

"Fair enough," she said as she leafed through the pages of the book, not really taking anything in save for a couple headings. After a couple minutes of silence, Ginny looked up and broke the silence. "This Wednesday night is another full moon, isn't it?"

Harry startled slightly at the unexpected sound. He had been gazing into the fireplace and lost himself momentarily in the blazing embers.

“Ye—Yeah, Wednesday night is a full moon. But I’ve got all day to take a nap and Pepper-Up potion prepared if need be, so I should be fine for the ball on Thursday night.”

“Oh, it’s not that,” Ginny waved his comments aside. “I was just wondering, well....” She trailed off seemingly trying to think of how to phrase what she needed to say.

Harry, meanwhile, was wracking his brain to try to figure out what she was on about. It really was horrible timing that the full moon ended up on Christmas Eve, but why would she bring that up? “Are you worried it’ll be harder to hide the fact now that classes are out?”

“No, it’s not that either.” She growled at herself. “Why can’t I just ask you this?” she finally cried in frustration.

“You want to come with?” Harry finally asked in dawning realization.

“I don’t want to intrude,” Ginny hastily inserted. “But I was wondering if you thought Professor Lupin might want some extra company. You said that having other animals around seems to help calm him when he’s in that form, so I didn’t know if my going along as well would help. Or if either of you would mind, or....”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Harry interrupted. “And I can’t see Remus minding either. Most of the time is spent in animal form, either just wrestling or lying around. I end up falling asleep eventually, and Remus wakes me up when he changes back. I don’t know if more animals will help or not, but it couldn’t hurt to try, if you wanted to come. But don’t feel like you have to or anything.”

“I think I would like to, if you’re sure you don’t mind,” Ginny told him. “It will be nice to see Professor Lupin again, and I haven’t gotten much opportunity to spend time as a lioness.”

“Something we’ll have to rectify,” Harry interjected with a smile. “Especially now that we’ve both got some extra time on our hands.”

“It’ll be hard to get away from everybody without raising suspicion though,” Ginny commented.

“Good point,” Harry conceded. “We’ll figure something out,” he finally added at length.

OoOoO

After spending Saturday afternoon training in the Room of Requirement, Harry made his way back to Gryffindor Tower to find Ron, Hermione, and Neville sitting around in front of the fire. Hermione had a book open in her lap, while Ron was trouncing Neville in a game of chess. Ron was the first to notice Harry’s entrance. “Harry, mate, where’ve you been?”

Harry smiled at his friend. “In my office,” he replied kindly.

“What were you doing in there?” Neville asked as he captured one of Ron’s pawns with a knight. Ron smirked as his queen promptly destroyed the offending knight, causing Neville to frown in thought.

“Just doing a little reading,” Harry answered.

“Reading?” Ron questioned almost in disgust. “We just finished the term yesterday. What could you possibly have to read already?”

“Honestly, Ron,” Hermione interjected as she looked up from her own book. “Some people read for fun or to learn something new and not just because they have to.”

“I swear, mate,” Ron said addressing Harry, “you used to be on my side in this, but you’ve turned on me.”

Hermione obviously did not take that remark too kindly, but Harry tuned the two of them out at that point. “So how are you doing, Neville?”

“Well, apart from getting humiliated in chess here,” Neville replied while waving his hand toward the chess board in front of him where

he had about half the pieces that Ron had, "I'm doing pretty well. I'm looking forward to having a couple weeks off, relaxing, and just enjoying the holidays."

"And the ball?" Harry asked lightly.

Neville paused for a moment before answering, "Yes, the ball as well."

Harry could tell there was something bothering his friend about the upcoming ball. He hoped it was nothing serious. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's nothing really. I am looking forward to it," he said, his eyes glazing over as he presumably imagined what the evening would hold in store.

"Especially the part where you get to spend the entire night with Hannah," Harry supplied helpfully.

Neville blushed slightly but didn't deny it. He nodded. "Yeah, it's just..."

Harry wracked his brain for what his friend was so nervous about when it hit him. He could almost smack himself for not catching onto it sooner. It was, after all, the same thing he had been worrying about not that long ago. "The dancing?"

Neville nodded glumly.

"I think you just worry too much, Neville. The more you concentrate on it, the worse it'll be. You need to just relax and let yourself have a good time. If you let yourself loosen up, the dancing will come on its own."

"If I remember, you were nearly having a nervous break down two years ago in preparation for the ball," Neville remarked not unkindly.

Harry smiled. "Too right I was, but I like to think I've grown up a bit since then. I adopted a new outlook on life a little while back. There are times to take things seriously and to worry, and there are times to just let yourself have a good time, to forget your worries and have fun. This is one of those times. If you're not going to have fun, why go at all, right?"

"When did you adopt this outlook," Hermione piped in, apparently finished with her argument with Ron.

"Well, it wasn't just a spur of the moment thing. It started a few weeks after my godfather died, and I think I finally really got it around my birthday," Harry replied candidly.

Hermione's mouth formed an "Oh," but no actual response came out.

"So anyway," Neville inserted to break the silence, "I take it you're looking forward to the ball then?"

"Yep," Harry replied. "I think it'll be a great time."

"I still say you're crazy for taking my sister," Ron interjected but without any venom.

"Well she is my best friend," Harry remarked. "Speaking of, have any of you seen Ginny at all today?"

Neville shook his head while Hermione replied, "No, I figured she was with you."

Harry shot her a questioning look at that but chose not to comment on it. "I haven't seen her all day."

"Maybe she's in the library," Hermione suggested.

Ron looked like he was going to say something, but Neville spoke up first. "Or she could be in her dorm."

“I could check the fifth year girls’ dorm if you’d like,” Hermione offered.

“No, you don’t have to do that. It’s not a big deal. I just hadn’t seen her at all today and was wondering if any of you had a clue what was up,” Harry told them.

“Well now I’m curious too,” Hermione said as she rose from her seat and strode over to the girls’ staircase. “I’ll be right back,” she called out.

“So what about you, Ron? You looking forward to the ball?” Harry asked his friend.

A blush crept up from Ron’s neck all the way up to his ears. Neville laughed along with Harry and said, “I think we can take that as a yes.”

“I’d say that’s a fair bet,” Harry agreed.

Hermione came back down the stairs at that point and made her way back to the three boys. “She’s up in her room. Apparently she woke up with a headache, so she’s just been taking it easy up there. Resting, reading, and spending time with Emerald.” The last was said giving Harry a pointed look which he could not interpret.

“What is it with everyone and reading?” Ron asked exasperatedly.

Harry and Neville chuckled while Hermione huffed in frustration. “Tell you what, Ron,” Harry inserted. “You wanna go for a fly? Maybe I’ll practice my Chaser skills a bit against you.”

“Now you’re talking, mate,” Ron agreed happily.

“What about you two? Interested?” he asked of Hermione and Neville.

“You want me to play Quidditch with you?” Neville asked incredulously.

“Why not?” Harry returned.

“Well, I’m no good on a broom for one...” he started, the shy boy of years past emerging once more.

“Nonsense, you just need a little practice is all. And it’s not like we’ll be playing against another team, and there’ll be no bludgers to unseat you. Why not give it a shot?” Harry returned with a grin.

“I don’t have a broom,” Neville continued.

“Neither do I,” Harry said thoughtfully. “Not a functional one at least. We’ll just have to make do on the school brooms for now.”

“If you don’t mind...” he began uneasily.

“Of course we don’t mind. Why else would we have asked you? This is just for fun, Neville. You need to loosen up,” Harry continued.

Neville looked to Ron as if seeking confirmation. “I’m with Harry, mate. It’ll be fun. You should come.”

Neville’s face split into a wide smile. “Alright. You’re on.”

“Excellent,” Harry and Ron both chimed. Harry turned to Hermione. “What about you, Hermy?”

“Don’t call me that,” Hermione shot back.

“Oh, is that a pet name that only Grawp gets to call you? I didn’t know you two were involved,” Harry said with a serious face.

Hermione’s jaw dropped. A second later Ron let out a snort, and that was all it took to break Harry’s composure. Neville, who had been told all about Hagrid’s half brother, also broke into peals of laughter. It took a couple minutes for the three boys to calm down, and even Hermione got a bit of a laugh out of it after a moment. Smiling good-naturedly she swatted Ron, who was closest to her, on the shoulder.

"If you three are quite done, I think I'll pass." When Harry made to speak up, she held up a hand and continued. "But I wouldn't mind coming out to watch."

"With a book, of course," Harry said. Hermione smiled at him as Ron groaned theatrically.

"You'd think he would be used to it by now," Neville commented.

Harry nodded his affirmation. "What about Ginny?" he asked turning to Hermione. "Do you think she'd be up for a little flying, or was her head still bothering her?"

"I don't know," Hermione said thoughtfully. "She seemed alright to me, but I didn't think to ask if she was feeling any better now. I just assumed that since she was still up there that it was still a bother."

"Well it couldn't hurt to ask," Neville inserted. "If she says no, then no big deal. But if we don't ask, and she is feeling better...." He left the thought unfinished.

"Then we've got one angry Weasley on our hands," Harry finished for him.

Neville nodded. "Not something I'd want to have to deal with."

"I'll be back in a bit," Hermione said, already heading back toward the staircase.

While she went up to check on Ginny, the three boys visited their own dorm to insulate themselves in some thick jumpers and cloaks. The weather was pretty mild for this time of year, but it was still December and far from warm. Add to that the fact that they would be in the air flying at high speeds, and you would be asking for trouble if you did not prepare. Ron also made sure to grab his broom. They made it back down to the common room with time to spare. It was a few minutes later that they heard footsteps coming down the girls' staircase.

Ginny came down smiling, broom in hand, as she saw the three of them waiting. "Hermione's changing and grabbing some books. She'll be down in a minute," she informed them as she sat on the arm of an empty chair.

"How are you feeling?" Harry immediately asked.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Much better, thank you," she replied easily, but Harry knew that there was more that she was not saying. He had a feeling that she was reading the Occlumency book in her room and had made up the headache to curb Hermione's inquiry.

A moment later Hermione strolled down the staircase and into the room. "Shall we?"

And so the five of them headed through the castle and out onto the grounds. As they walked along, Ginny attempted to convince Harry to take her broom for the afternoon while she used a school broom. She still felt responsible for the fate of his Firebolt and felt that she should be the one to suffer for it, not him. Harry determinedly and repeatedly declined the offer, insisting that she was in no way at fault for what happened to the broom. After raiding the school broom shed, Harry and Neville each claiming one of the less worn down brooms, the four Gryffindors rose into the air with a quaffle and proceeded to play around. Hermione, in the meantime, headed into the stands to watch their antics as she read.

Two hours and copious amounts of warming charms later, the group headed back to the castle in high spirits. They ran into Luna in the Entrance Hall on her way to dinner, so the Gryffindors invited her to sit with them. The rules were more lax now that the holidays had begun. Normally there would not even be house tables set up, but because of the ball, the attendance of those staying in the castle for the holidays was much higher than usual.

The addition to their table earned them some curious glances but nothing more. They enjoyed the meal the house elves cooked up amongst light-hearted chatter and laughter. The castle was very relaxed at the moment. With classes just recently ending for the winter break and a lull in Death Eater attacks, the student body was

breathing a collective sigh of relief. And at the same time, anticipation for Christmas and the coming ball was raising spirits.

The next day heralded Harry's double session of HA classes. He had debated over whether or not to continue the classes over the holidays, but in the end decided that there was little reason to stop. As it turned out, none of his students were returning home for the holidays, so nobody would end up behind as a result. He had told both classes about his intentions the previous weekend and had been surprised at their reactions. They cheered.

He had expected some grumbling at least. He was hopeful that they would accept it and not fight him too much on the extra work. Their immediate acceptance had not even crossed his mind, let alone the fact that they were happy about it. After taking a moment to collect himself, he had announced that anyone leaving the castle for the holidays should let him know by the end of the week. It was now the weekend, and nobody had contacted him. He assumed all his students were remaining in the castle. He was quite correct. It probably did not hurt that his classes were completely comprised of students of age to go to the Yule Ball.

His HA classes were going marvelously. In the BHA, Harry was moving right along through the subjects his IHA had covered the previous year. They were set to start work on Patronuses over the holidays. There was a small group of students who were proving to be quite adept in this area of study. After their last class he had asked them to meet him with him a few minutes before class today.

Harry surveyed the seven students from all four houses in front of him, a lone Gryffindor and two representatives each from the other houses. The room provided some simple seating arrangements for the seven, and he stood before them. They held similar facial expressions, curiosity being the most prominent. The most notable observation Harry made was the lack of reaction from all seven of being within such close quarters of students of another house. From many of his students, he still had to deal with house prejudices. Most could not be in the relative vicinity of Slytherin students without keeping a wary eye on them. This in turn kept the Slytherins on the alert. He did not

see that same attitude here, which made him distinctly proud of the seven. That would hopefully help with what he had in mind.

Harry gave them all a genuine smile before he began. "I suppose you're all wondering why I asked you to come early today." There were nods all around, so Harry continued. "You seven are by far the best in your class. You're constantly the first to get every spell, and you've been a huge help to me in assisting your classmates in learning new spells." This had the effect of spreading smiles across all their faces. "I was considering asking if you would want some private training to help you catch up with the advanced class, but I had another thought that I thought might work better for all of us."

All seven were leaning forward eagerly, obviously interested in whatever it was Harry had in mind for them. "Frankly, I need you all to stay in the class you're in now. Without you all, things wouldn't run anywhere near as smoothly, so I'd like to keep you there. But at the same time, I don't want to hold you all back. What I was thinking is that you all would stay in your current class, and for about half the class you'd work with everyone else, learning the new material yourself and then helping your classmates with it. But then sometime after the halfway point in each class, I would have you seven separate from your friends and work together on some different things."

Harry paused to let the idea sink into their minds. "Once the other students start to catch on, your help isn't as needed, so you can all go work on something else while I get the rest of the students up to speed, with the help of the ones that you already helped along. How does that sound to you?"

Harry stepped back and watched as they thought over what he had said. The members of each house instinctively turned to each other first, but they were soon all huddling together to discuss it as a collective group. The scene brought a smile to Harry's face. It was great to see them making this a group decision, because it would involve them all working together as a group. His biggest fear was that there would be some hostility between the students based on house rivalries and prejudices. He could not have been happier with

the way they were handling things thus far. He was really starting to think that this would work quite well for all of them.

A minute or two later, they came to their decision and turned to face Harry. Quinn Rasby, one of the Ravenclaw students, spoke up. "We're curious as to what types of things you had in mind for us to work on."

Harry took a moment to collect his thoughts before responding. "Some additional spells, but mostly advanced dueling tactics. I would have you dueling each other in more realistic circumstances, teaming up in different ways and with different numbers. I might give you different objectives to perform. That kind of thing."

The seven all turned towards each other and managed to communicate through looks as it only took a couple moments for Quinn to turn back toward him. "All right. That sounds good to us. When do we start?"

"Today," Harry told them. "I'll let you know when it's time to split apart, and what I want you to do today is split into two teams. I want one person from each house on each of the teams. Nicholas, since you're the only Gryffindor, I want you to switch back and forth between teams. I'll let the rest of you decide how to split up for now, just so long as you don't have two people from the same house on the same team. I want you to stick to low level hexes for today to give you all a chance to get used to working together."

They all nodded their acceptance. Harry left them to their own devices as he headed over to the side of the room. He marked off a section of the room and put up some basic wards to prevent stray spells from entering or exiting the area. While he was setting that up, students began trickling into the room. Come 10:00, he shut and locked the door and began class. As promised, he sent the seven students off to do their own thing a little over halfway through the class. The other students were casting curious looks their way, but most continued to diligently work on the new spells.

Harry made sure the seven got started all right then turned his attention back to the rest of his students. He made sure to keep an

eye on the seven whenever he could but left them to work independently for the remainder of the class. The one problem with this new setup was that he was basically leaving them up to their own devices. He had to keep most of his attention on the rest of the class, and he did not have the time to baby-sit them. He had to trust that they would take the task seriously and that they would not begin acting inappropriately. His biggest fear was how the two Slytherin students would be treated by the other five, but so far there did not appear to be any cause for concern.

The next couple days flew by quickly enough, spent in the company of friends. Harry only managed to slip away once for training, much to his chagrin, but he could not complain too much. After all, it was not often he got the opportunity to just have fun with his friends without having any classes or anything else to worry about.

Wednesday rolled around soon enough, and Harry and Ginny both skived off to bed early claiming that they wanted to be well rested for Christmas and the ball. Harry leant his invisibility cloak to Ginny so that she could sneak out, while he just changed into owl form and flew out a window. They met in the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. Harry was waiting at the entrance with the knot pressed so that Ginny could approach safely.

When they made it to the Shrieking Shack, Harry entered first to find Remus waiting for him. Harry greeted the werewolf warmly and told him that he had brought some extra company for the night's festivities. This earned him a raised eyebrow from the werewolf. It was at that moment that Ginny's head popped through the trapdoor. She looked around curiously, this being her first time seeing the inside of the infamous haunted Shrieking Shack.

"Ginny Weasley," Remus said aloud. "It's been a long time," he told her as he held his hand out to help her up into the room.

"Yes it has, Professor Lupin. It's good to see you again," she greeted him cheerfully.

“It’s a pleasure. And I must insist that you drop the formalities. It’s been several years since I’ve been your professor, and Remus suits me just fine,” he told her with a smile, belying his curiosity and fear.

“Remus, then,” Ginny agreed pleasantly

“I must say I’m at a bit of a loss,” Remus continued looking back and forth between the two teens. “Don’t take this the wrong way, because it is nice to see you, but what are you doing here? And why would you bring her with you?” he turned his attention fully to Harry as he began to pace. “You know the dangers involved here. I can’t have any humans around here. Even with the potion, I won’t take that kind of risk.”

“Relax, Remus,” Harry scolded gently.

“I will not relax. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened—“

“Nothing is going to happen,” Harry calmly interrupted.

“And how can you be so sure,” the werewolf demanded.

“Did I forget to mention that apart from being a good friend and my date to tomorrow’s ball, that Ginny here is also a pupil of mine?” Harry asked him casually, with a mischievous grin spreading across his lips.

“Pupil?” Remus asked thickly.

Harry just smirked. “Ginny? Would you mind showing Remus here what I taught you?” Harry glanced to Ginny who was smiling back at him timorously, nervous at her one time professor’s attitude regarding her presence.

“Sure, Harry,” she agreed. A couple of seconds later, Ginny Weasley was no longer to be found in the dingy room. In her place stood a majestic lioness, golden-red fur gleaming in the candlelight.

Remus's jaw hit the floor. He stared at the lioness in front of him for a long moment, before turning his gobsmacked expression toward Harry. "You—how? What?"

Ginny, meanwhile, transformed back into human form and blithely remarked, "I think we've broken him."

Harry smirked at her. "I think you may be right. Remus, coherent sentences, please."

Remus sank down into a scratched up wooden chair and shook his head forcefully. "Let me get this straight. You," he said, directing his gaze to Harry, "taught her to be an animagus?"

"Yep," Harry supplied cheerfully.

"And you," here he turned to Ginny, "learned to transform from Harry."

"I think he's catching on," Ginny said to Harry.

"But you didn't manage to transform until this term," he remarked of Harry. "Which means you," now his focus was back to Ginny, "couldn't have begun learning until this term."

Ginny shrugged while Harry responded, "Right in one, Moony."

"But that's incredible," Remus exclaimed. "It's supposed to take years for an adult to manage a full transformation. All those years ago I was shocked that James and Sirius and especially Peter were able to manage it at all, though it took them a few years. Then you manage it after only half a year," he said to Harry, "and I'm thinking to myself that you must be extremely powerful to have managed that. Then you two come here and tell me that she," he tilted his head to Ginny, "was able to manage it in a couple months. Unbelievable. I always thought you'd be a talented witch, but..." he trailed off here as he seemed to lose what he was going to say.

“Oh, I’m not that remarkable,” Ginny told him straightforwardly. “I just had an incredible teacher. Left on my own, I’m not sure I would’ve been able to manage it at all, let alone in such a short time. I have Harry to thank for that.”

“Nonsense,” Harry cried out. “It may have taken you a bit longer, but I have no doubt that you would have been able to get along just fine without me.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “If you say so Harry,” she relented, not wanting to argue about it at that particular moment.

“Well I’m willing to bet that it’s a combination of both. Harry, you’re a remarkable teacher from what I’ve heard, and Ginny, I’ve always known we could expect great things from you,” Remus said with finality.

They were all quite for a long moment before Ginny broke the silence. “I hope you don’t me coming along,” she told Remus. “I don’t want to intrude on your time with Harry, but we weren’t sure if having an extra animagus around would help you any more. Plus I was a little curious about what you boys get up to out here.”

“I don’t mind at all, and you’re not intruding. I’m honoured that you want to help. There are not many who would.” He paused a moment. “So how long have you known about Harry’s ability? I was under the impression that he wasn’t telling his friends. Are you teaching Ron and Hermione as well?” The last was directed towards Harry.

“No, actually I didn’t exactly tell Ginny about my ability so much as she caught me at it,” Harry told the werewolf, grinning ruefully. “She asked me to teach her, I agreed, and here we are. Ron and Hermione still don’t know.”

Remus looked thoughtful and did not speak for a long moment. “Well, I don’t know what to say. It’s your decision of course, but I am surprised that you’re still keeping it from them.”

"If you could see how they've been acting this year you might not be so surprised," Ginny muttered darkly. Remus's sensitive hearing was not necessary for him to pick up Ginny's words.

He raised an eyebrow and looked between the two teens. "I heard about Ron kicking Harry off the Quidditch team, of course," Remus said. "But I'm afraid Harry hasn't volunteered too much information on them beyond that."

"Ron and I have gotten into a couple spats, and there's been some tension between Hermione and me," Harry told the man.

"That's putting it lightly," Ginny huffed. "Ron kicking him off the team was just the latest in a long line of prattish things my dear brother has done." She watched Harry carefully to make sure he did not seem upset at her outburst. He was watching her and gave her a shrug to show that it did not matter.

"Hermione has also been pretty unbearable at times. She kept trying to force Harry into opening up to her. She was convinced that Harry was secretly miserable and that he's just been putting on a brave front for the world. She also seemed to think she was the only one who could help him. Also, she keeps getting on his case whenever he utilizes any of his newfound privileges given to him as a result of his being a Professor."

"Assistant Professor," Harry corrected mildly.

Remus nodded absently as he assimilated this new information. He knew how frail friendships could become in the blink of an eye. He had once been suspected by his best friends of being a spy for Voldemort, and he had been rather quick to believe the same of Sirius after the deaths of James and Lily. He and Sirius had nearly murdered one of their other one time best friends. It was only Harry that had saved them from that fate, something he would forever be grateful to the young man for. Cold-blooded murder was not something he wanted on his conscience.

“Well it’s good to see you have at least one person you seem to trust,” Remus said to Harry before turning his gaze to Ginny pointedly.

“Yes, I certainly do,” Harry agreed readily, following the man’s gaze.

Ginny blushed faintly under their combined gaze. A silence descended upon them once again, finally broken by Remus who said, “You two should change. It won’t be long now.”

Not long after they morphed into the large cats, they both watched as Remus went through the obviously painful transformation from man to werewolf. The three wrestled around for a bit. When Harry and Ginny worked together, they were generally able to get the best of the werewolf. They wore themselves out in that manner, and Harry and Ginny eventually curled up near each other to get a couple hours of rest.

When Remus transformed back into human form, he shook Harry awake first. Harry blearily opened his eyes to find the face of a beautiful lioness in front of him, and without even giving it a thought, his tongue had left his mouth and licked across her cheek. A moment later, Remus’s quiet laughter broke through his sleepy haze, and his human mind caught up with himself. If his fur were not black and thick, Remus would have seen what a great cat looks like when it blushes.

Harry quickly transformed back into human form and quietly muttered, “Not a word,” to his weary friend.

Remus did his best to adopt an innocent expression as he held his hands out wide. Harry shook Ginny awake, and she gave a big, toothy yawn before rising to her four paws and changing back into human form. She rubbed at her cheek and muttered to herself about drooling. Remus was not close enough to hear it, and Harry was not going to correct her. They bid the werewolf goodbye after receiving his assurances that he would be fine. They made the trek back through the tunnel together, and both eventually made it to their beds for another couple hours of sleep before they would be rudely awakened to open presents on Christmas morning.

OoOoO

As he watched his two former students leave, Remus sank into a worn, wooden chair. He was physically exhausted from the night's transformation, but his mind was still sharp. Something was not quite adding up with Harry. It was clear that Harry had some secrets, and the prior night only leant further credence to that suspicion. Harry had learned to become an animagus in a rather remarkably short period of time by his telling, and he had taught Ginny how to transform in even less time. She had quite vehemently credited Harry for her rapid success, and, despite Harry's claims to the contrary, Remus had a feeling that Ginny was much more in the right.

He knew how hard the transformation was; he had watched his three best friends struggle through it. It had taken them a long time to manage it, and they had put so much time and energy into it. Even after they had managed it, for a long time the transformation had left them feeling drained. That did not appear to be the case with Harry so far as he could tell. Either Harry was just remarkably powerful, or there was something else going on that he did not know about. The fact that Harry was keeping things from Ron and Hermione only added to the mystery.

With Ginny added to the mix, Remus was quite sure that there was something he did not know about, and that was not even taking into account Harry's rather...interesting reaction to waking up next to a feline Ginny. One thing he knew about Harry, however, was that he would not be able to pry the information out of him. He was intensely curious, but he knew that he had to trust Harry. If he confronted Harry about it, he was likely to meet resistance and only set the boy on the alert. If he expressed his concerns to someone else and Harry found out about it, well, he did not want to think about that. No, he would just have to wait and see what other clues Harry would give away before doing anything.

A/N: Well thus ends the chapter. For discussions on the story, update notices, and the Teaserette Guessing Game, you can join my Yahoo Group at [www dot groups dot yahoo dot com slash group slash fakeasmile](http://www.dot.groups.yahoo.com/group/fakeasmile). There is an actual link on my bio page.

Chapter 15: An Unforgettable Christmas

Harry was crudely awakened from a very short sleep when a great lump crashed onto the mattress he was lying on, bellowing, "Wake up. Presents!"

Harry swatted at the lump, but it had left long before his arm would have made impact. He tried to burrow into his pillow to get back to sleep, but the lump, along with some other lumps, were making too much noise. Rather than drifting back to sleep, Harry found himself becoming more aware and alert, and he realised that sleep would not be coming again any time soon.

He wearily rolled onto his back and blinked open his eyes. Judging by the amount of light in the room, Harry could tell that it was later than he was accustomed to waking. Thank Merlin for small miracles. Ron was not usually a morning person, so even on the one morning that he chose to wake up early, he still slept past Harry's usual wake up time. That did not make Harry any more pleased about the situation. He was tired, and he really wanted more sleep.

"Get up, Harry," the lump yelled at him. A moment later a pillow connected with the side of Harry's face.

Harry turned his head and glared at said lump. Apparently even the tentative ground their friendship had been on since Ron had thrown Harry off the Quidditch team was not enough to dampen Ron's enthusiasm this particular morning. Harry continued to glare.

"Come on! You're up before the rest of us every single morning, and you choose Christmas morning to sleep in?"

The stupid lump would not shut up. When the lump again bounced on his bed, Harry had to stop himself from hexing him into oblivion. Tempted as he was, Harry knew it was not worth giving away his wandless abilities. He finally rolled off the bed and onto his feet. As he rose to his full height, he released a big yawn and stretched, shaking off a small amount of his drowsiness.

As he looked around the room, he noticed that his dorm mates had already dug into their piles of presents. Instead of following suit, Harry threw on a dressing gown and walked into the bathroom. After taking care of the most pressing matters, he walked down to the common room. The room was sparsely populated, but the creatures of note were Hermione and Ginny who were both sitting in front of the fire with piles of wrapped presents surrounding them.

“There you are,” Hermione called out. “We’ve been waiting here for you guys so we could all open our presents together.”

Ginny did not even move to greet him. He could not see her very well, but he was fairly sure she had fallen asleep on the sofa. If only he were so lucky.

Harry nodded to Hermione, then turned and headed back up to his dorm. He picked up his wand and levitated his pile of presents as he left to walk back down. Ron noticed his behaviour and asked, “Where are you going, Harry?”

“The girls are downstairs waiting on us to open presents,” he replied shortly but not unkindly.

Ron adopted a sheepish expression as he looked back at his own pile of presents, over half of which were already unwrapped. Harry turned towards Neville, who had only opened a couple presents so far, “You coming, Nev?”

The boy looked thoughtful. “Nev?”

“I’m tired, and anything longer than one syllable just isn’t going to work right now,” Harry replied.

Neville laughed. “Works for me. Let me just get everything together, and I’ll meet you down there.”

Harry nodded and resumed his trek back to the common room. When he made his way over to the girls, he confirmed his suspicions on

Ginny's lack of consciousness. She was sprawled across the sofa preventing anyone else from sitting on it, but Harry solved that dilemma by lifting up Ginny's legs and plopping himself down underneath them. Ginny shifted slightly but did not wake. Harry realised that his presents were still waiting for him to command, so he had them descend to the ground right in front of the sofa.

"Where's Ron?" Hermione asked.

"Probably re-wrapping the presents he already opened," Harry replied easily. "Neville will be down in a minute as well."

Hermione huffed at hearing that Ron had started without them but otherwise did not respond.

Neville joined them after a minute, and Ron made his entrance shortly thereafter. Harry grabbed Ginny's foot to give her leg a shake and got a solid kick in the chest as a result. Ginny popped up at Harry's pained exclamation and immediately asked "What's wrong?"

"You kicked me," Harry forcefully responded.

"I did not," she denied, shaking her head as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I tried to wake you up, and you kicked me," Harry insisted, massaging his chest.

Ginny's face scrunched up in thought as she attempted to brush off her drowsiness to fully comprehend the situation. "I fell asleep?" she asked. Harry nodded. "And you tried to wake me up?" He nodded again. "And I kicked you?"

"Yes!"

"Well how did you try to wake me up?" she asked him.

"I grabbed your foot to shake you," Harry explained, still rubbing his chest. She really packed a punch, or a kick as the case may be.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Well it's your own fault then," she proclaimed, absolving herself of the matter.

"How do you reckon?" Harry demanded.

"I'm ticklish on my feet. Hell, pretty much everyone is ticklish on their feet. Grabbing my foot was just asking for trouble," she told him exasperatedly.

"Well now you tell me!"

"That's common sense, Harry," Neville quipped, smirking at the byplay.

"Fine then, be that way," Harry grumbled good naturedly. "Hey let me see that," he said reaching over to the long box in Ginny's pile of presents. "Don't know how that one got in there." He pulled it out of her pile and stuck it behind the couch. "Hey Neville, let me see your presents there."

"I don't think so, Harry," he challenged, hoarding his pile close to him.

"Don't be a baby, Harry," Ginny scolded him as she retrieved her long, wrapped gift.

"So how do you want to do this?" Neville asked after a moment of silence. "One at a time? Or a free for all?"

"I think we should go one at a time," Hermione immediately input. "That way we can see everyone's reactions."

"That will take forever," Ron whinged. "If you want to see everyone's reactions, why don't you just sit and watch while we all open our presents?"

Hoping to head off an argument, Harry offered up a compromise. "How about we go one at a time for the presents we got each other, and you can open everything else however you want?"

"Perfect," Ginny seconded.

"So who goes first?" Neville questioned.

"Youngest?" Hermione suggested.

Ginny grinned. "Works for me."

As Ginny turned to examine her pile to pick out her first present, Ron quickly grew impatient. "Just hurry up and open one."

"I don't know why you're so impatient," Hermione snapped. "You've already opened half your gifts."

Ron's face heated up as he retorted, "I didn't...."

"Don't even try it, mate," Harry interrupted. "Everybody knows."

Ron huffed and grumbled a bit. His face did not immediately lose its colour, nor did his impatience seem to fade. Meanwhile, Ginny was examining her presents. "Well I'm tempted to open this big one Harry got me because I'm rather curious about it," she commented. "But I think I might just save that one for last." With that, she grabbed Hermione's present, which looked to be in the shape of a book.

Harry was wrong in his estimation. It was not a book; it was two books. The Ultimate Guide to not Failing Your OWLs and 1001 Things Every Chaser Should Know. Ginny did not react to the first book, but when she saw the second she looked up with a smile and said, "Thanks, Hermione."

Harry was next, opening his present from Ron which turned out to be a large box of Chocolate Frogs. He smiled widely at his friend in thanks. There was something nice about the predictability in Ron's

gifts. Plus he was quite glad to have avoided Chudley Cannons memorabilia this time around.

Things took off from there. Harry watched with interest as each of his friends opened up his gifts to them. Hermione was the first to open one of his gifts. She squealed in delight when she found a personalized stationery set with a set of self-inking eagle feather quills. Harry smiled in reply to Hermione's exclaimed "Thank you." He had a feeling that Hermione would appreciate the practical gift, and he was glad to see how much she liked it.

Hermione gave him a book covering the basics of several different types of muggle martial arts. She said that she was impressed with what he had done combining a muggle concept to a wizard's duel and thought the reading material might help him out even more. Harry was actually pretty excited to read about it. He had never been allowed to watch the telly at the Dursley's, but he had caught glimpses of various shows over the years. He remembered seeing martial arts programmes on from time to time. If he could learn to move like that, there would be no telling what he could do. He enthusiastically thanked Hermione for the thoughtful gift.

In the next round of present opening, he found that Neville had given him an old edition of The Auror's Handbook. When Harry looked at him quizzically, Neville responded, "It was my dad's." Harry was at a loss for words. The few things he had of his parents were some of the most precious things he owned; he could only imagine that Neville felt much the same way about his parents' belongings. Harry was sure that Neville had more from his parents than he did, but he knew how important every little thing was, just the same.

Neville chose Harry's present next. Harry was not sure how his friend would react. He admittedly knew little about Herbology, having never done any reading or research beyond what they had covered in class. Knowing Neville was into the subject, he had asked the shopkeeper in Diagon Alley to see his rarer plants along with a brief summary of their properties. From there he picked out the one Neville was now uncovering.

When Neville had removed most of the wrapping, which Harry had charmed not to smash the plant, Harry heard the boy catch a sharp intake of breath. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked Harry with wondering eyes.

"I hope so?" Harry replied thickly. "What do you think it is?"

"Paliurus focus," Neville whispered in awe.

Hermione gasped, and Ron demanded, "What's the big deal about a plant?"

"That's not just any old plant," Hermione retorted.

"I was told that caring for the plant was supposed to help increase your focus and concentration and is said to help its owner achieve his goals," Harry stated helpfully, hoping Neville would like the gift.

"This is almost as rare as my *Mimulus Mimbletonia*," Neville remarked. "This must have cost you a fortune."

Harry scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably. "It really wasn't that much. The owner of the shop said he'd had it around for quite some time and that not many seemed interested in it," Harry told him.

"And when did you get a chance to talk to this shopkeeper?" Hermione inquired curiously.

Harry caught the inquisitive zeal in her voice and knew he had to be careful in his reply. "I sent him an owl asking about any rare plants he might have in stock, their properties, and how much they cost. He sent me a list back, and I chose from there," Harry lied easily, looking Hermione right in the eye as he did so. She did not question him further.

Ron was next. He was quite happy to find a set of Quidditch pads and keeper gloves as well as a box of chocolate frogs and enthusiastically thanked Harry for the gifts. Harry smiled in reply and gave a polite but quiet "You're welcome," in return. He had been slightly wary of giving

Ron a Quidditch gift because of their rift over Quidditch earlier in the term. He was glad to see that the gift did not appear to reawaken any of that tension.

Ginny, as she had said she would, saved Harry's present for last. It was the one he was both looking forward to and dreading the most. He knew she would like the present, and he was excited to see her initial reaction. Her present, however, had been much more expensive than any other. He was worried that she might not want to accept it, but he was also worried at his other friends' reactions, namely Ron's.

Ginny wasted no time in tearing the wrappings off, revealing a sleek black case. With not a small amount of anticipation, Ginny undid the latch on the case and opened it up. She literally squeaked. The case slammed shut. She looked at Harry with big eyes, then quickly glanced back down, reopening the case a fraction to peek back inside. Her initial assessment confirmed, she bounced into Harry's lap so fast that she was lucky she did not get hexed in his surprise. As it was, he ended up with a mouthful of Ginny's hair that he was trying to spit out as she hugged him tightly.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," Ginny squealed by his ear. "Oh I could just kiss you."

Harry turned his head sharply towards her at her final proclamation. She had frozen slightly but was still holding him firmly. Harry could not see her face, but he watched as a red tint crept up her ear.

"Well what is it?" Ron impatiently asked, breaking the spell of the moment. Not one to sit and wait for a response, he got to his feet and walked over to the case. When he flipped the lid, he gasped. "That's a Nimbus," he exclaimed. He reached in to turn the broom for a better look. "A 2001! You bought her a Nimbus 2001?" he asked incredulously, turning to Harry.

Harry, his arms wrapped around Ginny's back, was still trying to remove the last of Ginny's hair out of his mouth. He nodded over Ginny's shoulder. "I got a good deal on it," he explained shortly. As he

removed the last tendrils of hair from his mouth, he ducked his head down slightly into her neck and inhaled deeply, catching the scent from Ginny's hair. He could not stop the sigh of contentment that escaped his lips. He could not quite place the smell; it was just indefinably Ginny.

“How on Earth did you get a deal on a Nimbus 2001? And what exactly is considered a good deal on it?” Ron demanded, causing Harry to lift his head back up to meet the boy's glare.

“First of all, what I paid for it is none of your business,” Harry retorted. “Second of all, I got a good deal because I made arrangements to purchase the new Nimbus model when it hits the market in late January.”

“There's a new Nimbus?” Ron asked in an awestruck voice, his earlier questions forgotten.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he nodded, and Ginny giggled into his neck. He was not sure if it was the feeling of his breath on her neck or just her brother's reaction that had elicited her quiet laughter, but he smiled and squeezed her tighter in response. “They said it would be out by late January. February at the absolute latest. It's supposed to be a little faster than the Firebolt, with greater acceleration and maneuverability.”

“ Brilliant,” Ron responded dreamily, visions of broomsticks undoubtedly dancing in his mind.

Ginny finally leaned back from Harry, still straddling his lap. Their eyes caught for a moment. “Thank you, Harry,” she whispered just before leaning in to give him a peck on the cheek. She slid off his lap and returned to her broom case, very carefully and almost reverentially lifting the broom out of it. “I have my own broom,” she whispered to herself in awe. “I have my very own Nimbus 2001.”

Harry smiled as he watched her reaction. She was smiling widely. Her eyes were shining. She was excited. He looked around. Nobody was blowing up. In fact, everyone seemed to be smiling. Neville gave

him a thumbs up, while Hermione just gave him a knowing look. Ron seemed to be mulling over the idea of a broom that was even better than a Firebolt. It could not have gone any better.

Harry was next on the list, having been born a day after Neville. They were on the final round of present opening, and he had saved Ginny's for last. Her gift was in a small, rectangular box that felt like it was made of wood. He tore into the wrapping paper to find a small reddish coloured wood box. There was a carving of a broomstick on the top of it. Harry flipped the latch on it and opened it up. A golden blur made to rush out of the box and away from Harry, and his instincts took over. His hand extended and closed around the golden object before it made it a meter away from the box. Harry very carefully opened up his hand. "You bought me a snitch?" he asked to Ginny disbelievingly. Ron gasped.

Ginny nodded meekly. "Do you like it?" she asked with her nervousness written clearly across her face.

"Like it?" Harry repeated. "I love it! Thank you." With his left hand he reached out and squeezed her right, while he opened his right hand, allowing the snitch to stretch its wings for a moment before trying to make its escape. Harry was much too fast for it.

"I thought the school's best Seeker ought to have his own snitch," Ginny told him.

"How could you afford this?" Harry asked without thinking. Luckily, Ginny was neither surprised nor offended at the question.

"I sold my body to Fred and George for experimentation for their newest products," she candidly replied.

Harry's jaw dropped. "You did what? No. Take it back," he told her, trying to hand the snitch over to her. When it tried to fly away again, he was forced to snatch it back out of the air. He began reaching for the box to lock it up when the sound of laughter stopped him. Ginny's laughter. Harry looked at her sharply. "You were just having me on?"

“Well I did have their help. I’m working out a way to work it off with them,” Ginny replied truthfully. “I won’t be testing any of their products; at least, not on myself,” she added with a smirk.

“Thank you,” Harry told her again.

“You’re welcome, Harry.”

Neville had saved Ginny's present for last and was quite pleased to receive a book on how to care for his newest plant. He thanked her and wasted little time before hiding behind the cover of the book.

Ron was next. The only unopened gift in his pile was the one from Hermione. He haphazardly tore through the wrapping paper to reveal a book on the complete history of the Chudley Cannons from the team’s formation until present day. Harry had never before seen Ron look at a book with such fondness.

Being the oldest, Hermione was the last of them to open her final gift. She lifted the gift from Ron into her lap and methodically slipped her finger underneath the tape at every edge, preserving the wrapping paper for reasons known only to Hermione. She eventually uncovered a scented candle and body potion. Hermione smiled brightly at Ron and thanked him for the gift.

Not long afterwards, they each went up to their rooms to put away their presents. Harry very happily packed away his new belongings. In addition to the gifts from his four friends, he had received the usual Weasley jumper from Mrs. Weasley plus a tin of fudge. From Hagrid, Harry received a wooden carving of a griffin. Harry was rather impressed with Hagrid’s craftsmanship. It did not move around like the model of a Hungarian Horntail he had received during the Triwizard Tournament, but it was very finely fashioned. Harry put it on his bedside table. He chuckled as he put away the socks Dobby had knit for him and the note about his year long subscription to the Quibbler from Luna. Both Luna and Dobby were unique friends, and their gifts were indicative of that.

Remus had sent Harry a leather jacket. Inside a pocket of the coat, Remus had stashed a note which Harry just noticed as he was putting it away. Remus thanked him profusely for being there for him over the last few months, stressing just how much it meant to him. He also asked Harry to pass along his thanks to Ginny as well. He explained that Tonks had helped him pick out the jacket. They both thought it might come in handy when he finally got around to riding Sirius's motorbike.

Harry spent most of the day lazing around with his friends. He did manage to sneak in a short nap, as did Ginny. Not too long after lunch ended, the girls all began heading up to their dorms to begin preparing for the ball, which left the boys a couple hours to themselves before they would need to get ready. Harry could not help but think that being a guy definitely had its advantages.

Harry, Neville, and Ron spent most of that time playing exploding snap or chess. At one point Ron sat on the sidelines and watched as Harry and Neville battled each other over the chess board. He spent the entire time groaning and pulling his hair out over all the moves they were missing. Neither Harry nor Neville really cared. They were evenly matched, so it was a good game which Harry narrowly won.

The boys all eventually ascended the stairs to their dorms to get ready for the ball. Harry showered, which Ron neglected to do, before he donned his crimson and gold robes. The others all headed back down before him, and as he stood there looking in front of the mirror, Harry remembered something Ginny had once said to him. Looking around to make sure nobody was around, he concentrated and willed his hair to shorten back to the length he used to wear it. He noticed, with equal parts amusement and frustration, that his hair was once again sticking up at the back.

Harry examined himself critically in the mirror. It was not so terrible, he supposed. If Ginny liked it, well, that was good enough for him. On the other hand, he wondered how it might look if he shortened the sides a bit. He spent the next several minutes trying out slightly different styles in front of the mirror that would look a little nicer but still maintain that messy, windswept look he shared with his father.

He finally found the right combination and smiled at his reflection in satisfaction.

Taking one last look at himself to make sure he looked all right, Harry headed down to the common room to join the rest of the Gryffindor boys who were all standing or sitting around waiting for their dates and the start of the ball. He spotted Ron's red hair easily enough as he descended the stairs and noticed Neville nearby, so he headed in their direction. A lot of surprised eyes met him as he entered into the common room. Ron voiced the thought. "Your hair...." Harry could not tell whether the reaction was at all positive or negative.

"Your sister once told me she liked it better short," Harry replied with a shrug. That seemed to satisfy most of the onlookers, for they all drifted back to their own conversations.

"How'd you cut it?" Ron asked him.

"I looked up a charm a few days ago," Harry lied smoothly.

"Ginny will be surprised," Neville told him.

"I hope so," Harry returned with a small, nervous smile, which caused Neville's grin to widen. "When are you meeting Hannah?" Harry asked him curiously.

"Not for another 15 minutes," Neville replied glancing at his watch.

"In the entrance hall? Or...."

"I'm meeting her near the entrance to their common room. We're not supposed to know the exact location, so she told me a place to meet her that's nearby," Neville answered.

"Good on you," Harry replied. "We'll try to meet you in the entrance hall before the doors open, but if we don't make it in time, grab a table with whoever else is there, and we'll find you."

"All right," Neville agreed. He looked down at his watch again. "I should probably go, just in case she's early."

Harry did not think there was much chance of that happening, but he knew that his friend would feel more comfortable knowing he was not going to leave his date waiting for him. "Sounds like a plan. See you down there, mate."

"See you Harry," Neville called back. Harry was already turning his attention back to the girls' staircase where most of the eyes in the room were currently locked.

It was several minutes later when the first of the girls came down. Stephanie, the third Chaser on the Quidditch team, was one of them, along with another girl in her year. They were each met by their dates and escorted out of the portrait hole.

After that, more girls began descending down every couple minutes. About half the room had cleared out when Harry felt his stomach drop to his feet. Walking down the stairs in a black dress was none other than his date, Ginny Weasley. Taking in the sight of her, he unconsciously licked his suddenly dry lips.

The dress was strapless with a relatively low neckline. Harry briefly wondered to himself just how it was being held up. A moment later he could have smacked himself upside the head as the obvious answer came to him: magic. The dress clung to her body at every curve, and Harry could not stop his eyes from tracing every single one. He knew she was attractive, knew she had curves, but due to the bulky robes she usually wore, he had never really seen them showcased. Now he was seeing them in all their glory; well, maybe not quite all their glory...he really should not let his thoughts wander down that path.

As she made it all the way down the stairs and into the light of the common room, Harry noticed the dress shimmer. He looked closer and found golden flecks woven throughout the fabric. Even without the added effect, Ginny was positively glowing. She stopped her progress after taking a couple steps into the room, and Harry managed to kick-start his brain enough to walk out to meet her.

She smiled when she first noticed him, and Harry could swear he saw the room brighten at its appearance. Their eyes met as he was only several meters away, and her eyes did a casual flick to his hair. Another step, her eyes flew back to the top of his head and widened significantly, right alongside her smile.

Finally, after what seemed like several minutes, he made it to her. He stopped an arm's length away and paused briefly to allow his eyes one last opportunity to rake in her appearance from head to toe, before taking a final step towards her. Their bodies were nearly touching as he lifted his hand and gently traced her cheekbone with his fingertips. His eyes followed past his hand, and he found himself quite intrigued by the deep red mass of waves cascading down her back. He had to resist the urge to run his fingers through the long tresses of her hair.

Now if only he could get his throat to open back up. After a moment he managed to say, "You look..." a million adjectives rushed through his mind: amazing, incredible, gorgeous, sexy, stunning, wonderful, breathtaking. He finally decided on the one that said it all the best in his mind. "Beautiful." The word was said reverentially. Ginny blushed prettily behind her smile.

"You cut your hair?" she asked him wonderingly.

Harry nodded. "Do you like it?" he asked her, hoping he had not messed up.

"I love it," she replied. "But why?"

Harry shrugged. "You told me you really liked my hair the way it used to be."

"So you did this just for me?" she asked him.

"Yeah," Harry replied simply, as if that were the most obvious thing in the world.

“You do realise it will take a long time to grow back, right?” She whispered the question meaningfully, and Harry nodded in reply.

“I know. I might just keep it this way,” he told her honestly.

“Well thank you,” she told him sincerely. “And you look rather dashing, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied with only the slightest blush.

“Hermione should be down in a minute; then we can head down,” Ginny informed him.

Harry nodded absently. He could not help his eyes wandering up and down her figure. “That dress looks absolutely stunning on you,” he told her without consciously deciding to.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said blushing. “I still can’t believe I could actually afford it,” she commented half to herself as she self-consciously ran her hands down her sides to smooth out the fabric.

“Well, I for one am glad that you could,” Harry told her with an inner smugness. He was infinitely pleased with himself to have provided her the means to purchase that dress. She may get to wear it and keep it, but somehow Harry felt he was getting the better end of the deal.

Had Ron not been so nervously staring at the girls’ staircase throughout their exchange, he just might have felt the need to give Harry a black eye for the looks he was directing at his sister. Then again, most of the occupants of the common room would have to be given similar treatment.

They spent another minute waiting for Hermione. Ron had to be nudged forward to start moving as Hermione waited nervously for Ron to meet her. When he finally found himself directly in front of her, it was apparent that Ron had no idea what to say. His face, neck, and ears all stained red as the two stood there awkwardly for almost a full minute before Ron managed to stammer out. “You look incredible.”

Hermione, whose face was already pink, blushed brightly. Harry had to admit that Ron was not lying. She had tamed her hair as she had for the previous ball. From what Harry could see Hermione had pulled her hair up into an elegant knot, with a few soft curls framing her face. She was wearing lavender coloured robes. They were not quite as form fitting as Ginny's, but they definitely showcased a side of Hermione not often seen.

"Thank you," she replied. "You look good in those robes," she complimented him. "Blue is definitely your colour."

"Think you could convince my mum of that?" Ron grumbled good-naturedly, eliciting a small laugh from Hermione.

Hermione looked over to Harry and Ginny and smiled at them. "You look great Ginny, and Harry...your hair! You cut it. Oh, you look good."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry replied honestly. "You look rather striking as well."

The couples stood smiling at each other for a moment before Harry turned and held his arm out to Ginny. "Shall we head down, m'lady?"

She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm and replied, "Indeed, good sir." Harry placed his other hand on top of hers, and the two set off, chuckling at Ron's expression as he watched them.

Hermione just rolled her eyes and grabbed Ron by the arm. "Come on, Ron." The two of them caught up to Harry and Ginny easily, who had been walking at a leisurely pace. The four Gryffindors made their way down to the entrance hall in a mostly comfortable silence. Harry had to spend the entire walk concentrating on keeping his eyes forward so as not to trip or walk into anything. Despite his best efforts, they continued to drift over to the gorgeous red-head by his side. Luckily, with her arm in his, it was hard for him to completely stray off course, and they made it to their destination without incident.

The doors to the Great Hall had yet to open, so many students were milling around the entrance hall. Many students waved hello to Harry as he passed by. Harry returned their greetings, referring to them each by name, a feat which Ginny pointed out.

“Well, what kind of professor would I be if I didn’t even learn my students’ names?” Harry asked her.

Ginny shrugged. “I have a hard enough time keeping track of who everybody is in just our HA class. I’d be in way over my head having to remember the names of everyone in the second class on top of that.”

“It took me a while to start getting them down, but when you’re working with them twice a week, it’s bound to stick in your head eventually,” Harry responded. “When you’re in my class, you don’t necessarily work with everybody there, but I do. I make it a point to try to interact with each student every class, even if it’s just a passing greeting or remark as I make my rounds. I think it helps them to know that I’m there and that I am paying attention to them, even if I’m not working with them directly. Does that make sense?”

“Perfectly,” Ginny replied thoughtfully. “I guess I had never really thought about it that way, but I see your point. You really are a great teacher, Harry. Have you ever thought of becoming a professor in the future?”

Harry stopped and looked at her. “No, actually, I hadn’t, but it’s not a bad thought,” he mused aloud. Hermione and Ron kept walking, though they each sent a curious, furtive glance their way.

“You seem like you enjoy it,” Ginny input. “And you’re obviously good at it.”

The last was said with such honesty and finality that Harry had to work to fight down a blush. “Thank you,” he told her sincerely. “I think I’ll have to give that some thought. The only thing I had ever really considered becoming was an auror, and I’m not even sure why. I

think just because I'm good at defense and seem to always end up in the middle of every fight."

"Don't get me wrong," Ginny said. "I think you'd make an incredible auror as well. But you should really consider your options and make sure that you do what you want to do, what you think will make you happy."

"I'm still not used to the idea that I actually finally get a say in where my life is headed," Harry commented off-handedly.

Ginny slid her hand down his arm and squeezed his hand. She turned and leaned in rather close to him. "You say that as if you haven't been doing whatever you want for the past several months," she teased in a whisper.

Harry's stomach leapt slightly as he felt her body lightly brush against his. He had to shake his head to clear his thoughts as he replied, "That's true, but I've had to do it all in secret. I've had to hide so much. It's frustrating to have to lie to everybody and hide so much from them. I wish I could just be me and stop with all the games."

"You know you can always just be yourself with me," Ginny told him. "You don't have to hide things or pretend you're someone or something else."

"I know," Harry responded looking deep into her eyes. "And you have no idea how much it means to me. I...." Harry shook his head, at a loss for words. "But even then, there is still so much I've kept from you, that I can't tell you yet. Not until you learn...."

Ginny nodded. "Occlumency," she said in a whisper.

"How's the reading coming?" he asked her curiously.

She shrugged. "All right, I guess. I haven't been able to get away as much as I would have liked, but I'm making progress."

"I know what you mean," Harry ruefully agreed. "I've hardly done any training all break. Hermione and Ron have been hanging around all the time, and they make it really hard to break away for some private time. Even Hermione has been putting down the books. It's great that they want to spend time with me and everything, but they just seem to want to smother me. Any time I try to make an exit, they come up with some reason why I have to stay. If I say I'm going to go study in my office, Hermione will offer to study with me in the library, and even Ron will agree sometimes. It's maddening."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Ginny replied carefully. "I think they're just trying to make up for last term, since you three spent so much time at odds."

"I know, which is what makes it so hard to actually be mad at them for it," Harry returned. "But honestly, you'd think they might realize that I need a little bit of privacy."

"I don't know what to tell you, Harry. Maybe things will level out once classes begin again."

"I hope so," Harry responded. "I don't want to fall behind." Harry looked over Ginny's shoulder and spotted Neville and Hannah. "Oh, there's Neville," he said giving his head a slight flick in their direction.

Ginny spun around and easily spotted the couple. "Let's go over and say hi," she said, tugging on his hand and pulling him towards them.

Harry smiled, squeezing her hand in return. She glanced over her shoulder at him and gave him a small smirk at the gesture. "Hello you two," Harry greeted. "You make quite the dashing couple."

Neville blushed and looked down at his shoes. Hannah's cheeks burned to match his. "Thanks, Harry. The two of you look incredible together."

Harry managed to fight down his blush as he turned to look at his date. He noticed Ginny's cheeks had tinged slightly pink at the compliment. He gave her hand another squeeze. She gave his hand

a small squeeze in return, and the couple smiled at each other. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Neville and Hannah share a knowing look, though he was not quite sure what it was about.

"There you are," an overly loud and cordial voice announced. Harry turned his head over his right shoulder to find Ernie McMillan maneuvering his way through the crowds towards them with his date on his arm. Harry immediately recognized her as Julianne Murphy, a fifth year Hufflepuff in his BHA classes. The boy greeted Harry and Neville each with a handshake and Ginny with a short bow. Hannah, with whom he was good friends, offered her hand to him. He grasped her finger tips lightly, bent down at the knee and dropped a kiss on the back of her hand. Hannah giggled at the formality of it and swatted him on the shoulder as Ernie stood up to his full height.

"Honestly, Ernie, this is just a school ball, not some fancy Ministry function," she protested good-naturedly. The boy did not show any indication he had even heard her.

Luna and Alex approached just then, but their greetings were interrupted by the sound of the doors to the Great Hall opening. Dumbledore stood silhouetted in the doorway. There were fairy lights suspended in midair behind him scattered throughout the Hall, replacing the usual candles. Large snow flakes drifted down from the sky-like ceiling only to disappear once level with the lights. There were Christmas trees in each corner of the room plus one behind the Head Table.

The four house tables were gone, replaced by numerous round tables that would seat eight to ten comfortably. Each table had its own candelabra in addition to the fairy lights overhead to provide adequate light during the meal time. The room as a whole was only dimly lit. A large area was left open in the centre of the room which Harry assumed was the dance floor. The walls were adorned with a variety of decorations from wreaths to garland to giant candy canes. Harry thought he might have even seen a snowman wearing dress robes, but he could not be sure because there were too many people blocking his view.

The four couples made their way into the room together and immediately claimed one of the tables as their own. It was only as they were sitting and Harry noticed the two empty chairs that he realized they had lost Ron and Hermione somewhere along the way. He stood and scanned the Great Hall for them. Ron's red hair easily attracted his attention on the other side of the hall. The two of them were looked a little lost trying to find the rest of their party. Harry waved over his head to catch their attention. After a minute, Ron finally noticed. He caught Hermione's attention and pointed Harry out to her. The two began skirting the dance floor, rather than walking through it, to join them. In the meantime, Harry sat back down in his seat and found his eyes drawn to the beautiful redhead beside him. Now that they were not walking, however, he had nothing save decorum to stop him from staring.

Before he had realised any time had passed, Hermione and Ron had arrived and were sitting themselves in the only two empty seats left at the table. Harry shook his head at himself and greeted the pair. Menus appeared in front of each place-setting. Harry picked up his menu along with the rest of the students in the hall. As he opened up his menu he shifted himself slightly causing his leg to run up against Ginny's. He looked over at her from behind his menu, and she did likewise. They shared a warm smile, and neither broke the contact with their legs. Ginny turned back to her menu after a moment, and Harry forced himself to do likewise.

He had a hard time concentrating on the menu and eventually decided on some sort of steak dish. He put his menu down and made his order. The menu promptly disappeared, and his meal appeared in front of him. Looking around, he noticed that he was the last to place his order. They ate amidst light conversation. The topic stayed mostly on the holidays and the presents they had each received that morning. As dessert was being served, Ernie posed the question, "So what do you all think? Is Malfoy going to get pranked again tonight?"

Harry and Ginny shared a short look. Neither of them had even thought about pranking the Slytherin boy tonight. Their minds had been too focused on their own evening. Neville's eyes flicked to Harry and Ginny before answering, "I don't think so. I bet his prankers gave him the night off this evening. It is Christmas, after all."

"All the more reason to prank him," Ron blurted out. "It would make a great Christmas present."

"For you, maybe," Hermione commented. "I doubt he'd see it that way." She appeared like she wanted to go on but visibly restrained herself to avoid an argument.

"That's an interesting necklace you have on, Luna. I don't think I've seen you wear it before," Ginny said, tactfully changing the conversation.

"Oh this?" Luna asked as she reached to her neck with her left hand and fingered the cord of the necklace. "It was a gift."

"A gift?" Hermione asked curiously. "Who was it from?"

"Harry," Luna responded simply, turning her protuberant eyes in his direction.

"Harry bought that for you?" Ginny asked in disbelief.

"Oh yes," Luna replied. "It was very thoughtful of him to get this particular necklace for me, though I'm not sure whether or not I'll actually be needing it tonight." She turned her attention to her date, Alex, as she said this last bit and seemed to almost be sizing him up.

"What does that mean?" Hermione queried uncomprehendingly. "You're wearing it, aren't you?"

She turned back to Hermione. "Of course I am. I'm just unsure whether or not its properties will be of any use to me tonight," she responded vaguely, again turning her gaze back to Alex who was looking rather confused at the attention she was paying him.

"Special properties?" Hannah Abbot asked with genuine curiosity. "What kind of properties does it have?" She shot Harry a short glance as if he might have had the answer written somewhere on his face.

"The cord was woven with the hairs of an Abraxan," the blonde witch explained as if that explained everything.

Hannah's face contorted in confusion, while Hermione went into interrogation mode. "Abraxan hairs? Their hairs don't have any magical properties. I'd have remembered reading about them. I read all about Abraxans when the Beaubatons students arrived in their Abraxan-drawn carriage for the tournament."

"Oh, you wouldn't have found the information in the library," Luna commented. "If you read the Quibbler you'd know that Abraxan hair is a natural repellent of nargles."

Harry looked around the table. Ron was still eating, seemingly oblivious to the conversation. Neville and Alex were both listening but appeared to be having trouble following the conversation. Ernie was talking quietly to Julianne. Hermione, Hannah, and Ginny were actively following the conversation but had entirely different expressions on their faces. Hermione's face had twisted into a scowl at the mention of the Quibbler holding knowledge. Hannah had refocused on the actual necklace around Luna's neck. Ginny's face had scrunched slightly in thought. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and ever so slightly bit down on it as she puzzled over this latest piece of information. Harry found his gaze caught on her lips.

Ginny suddenly jerked forward and snapped her fingers, obviously having figured out whatever she was puzzling over. "Mistletoe," she exclaimed in triumph. The entire table turned to look at her. She shook her head at all the confused stares she was receiving. "Nargles infest mistletoe, right?"

Harry was surprised she had remembered that. Had he not organized his mind for Occlumency, he doubted he would ever have remembered that extraneous bit of information. Having all his memories of Luna stored in one location had made it much easier for him to find something he could get for his odd friend. Ginny had yet to go through the process of organizing her mind, leaving Harry quite surprised at her ability to remember that little factoid. "That's right," he told her in a soft voice.

She turned her triumphant smile towards him. "You bought her a necklace that would repel nargles?" she asked. He nodded. "So that she wouldn't have to worry about going near any mistletoe?" Harry shrugged and nodded again. "That's so sweet of you, Harry," she cried out. She leant toward him and gave him a peck on his cheek, and Harry felt his skin burn at the contact and spread through his face. Try as he might, he could not fight down the blush, nor the strange tingling sensation left behind. He turned his attention back to Luna and noticed Alex blushing beside her as realisation dawned on him. Mistletoe only meant one thing.

Any further conversation was interrupted as the Headmaster rose from his seat and tapped his knife to his glass. "Good evening. I trust everyone enjoyed the scrumptious meal provided by our house elves." Hermione harrumphed at the plight of the house elves as Dumbledore continued. "Now that we have sufficiently stuffed ourselves, I feel it is time to open up the dance floor. It is with great pleasure that I introduce to you the entertainment for this evening from across the pond, Nine Inch Wands."

The students all rose to their feet and clapped enthusiastically for the band. Ginny laid her hand on his shoulder and leaned up right to his ear to explain that they were an up-and-coming band that was quickly rising in popularity. They were supposed to be the next Weird Sisters. Harry did not really follow music. He could care less about this band, but he stood and clapped along with everyone else all the same.

As the band settled down and announced that they would be opening up with a traditional waltz. The professors all descended onto the floor to lead them off while most of the students sat right back down, everybody at their table included. All but Harry, that is. Instead, Harry bowed and held his hand out to Ginny. "May I have the honour of this dance?" he asked cordially.

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To say Ginny was surprised would be an understatement. She had anticipated having to drag Harry out onto the dance floor just to get a couple dances in, but here he was asking her for the first dance. She quickly recovered and schooled her features into a prim countenance.

“The pleasure would be mine, good sir.” She gave her hand to him and let herself be led onto the dance floor. They moved into position to begin the dance, and Ginny could not help but notice the way Harry's eyes sparkled at her. She could tell that this he was up to something, and he was rather expecting to enjoy whatever it was.

With a cocky grin on his face, Harry asked, “Are you ready?” She only nodded in reply, still wondering how they had gotten into this situation. The music started and Ginny waited with a bit of trepidation for Harry to make the first move. She felt her jaw dropping as he began to gracefully lead her through the steps of the dance. Her eyes were drawn to his, and she noticed that his eyes never once left hers even as he led her with obvious practiced ease.

“You know, you're liable to catch flies if you keep that up,” Harry commented a couple minutes into the dance with, she noticed, a self-satisfied smirk firmly in place.

“But where...? How did you...?” Ginny stumbled over her questions, feeling at a complete loss for words.

“Where did I learn how to dance?” Harry inserted smugly. Ginny nodded. “What makes you think I couldn't dance before?” She gave him a look that expressed quite clearly that she was not going to fall for that one. “Okay, so I couldn't dance before,” Harry admitted.

Ginny smiled self-righteously. “The question is: how can you dance now?”

“Quite easily,” Harry replied with a mischievous smirk.

“You're not going to tell me?” Ginny asked while putting on her best fake pout.

“You'll find out in good time,” Harry returned. “For now, just enjoy the dance.”

And enjoy it she did. They danced the next few songs as well, which included two faster paced and one slow song. Ginny found herself

more and more impressed after each one. Harry danced and led and twirled her around with surprising ease. They had a good laugh at some of the more extravagant spins they performed. After a few songs, they moved off the dance floor to cool off with a goblet of pumpkin juice.

“I must say that I am quite impressed, Potter,” Ginny told him honestly. “I hadn’t expected you to actually do much dancing tonight, at least not without a lot of prodding. I definitely did not see this one coming. Here I was all ready to soak my poor toes at the end of the night – Don’t laugh. I could barely walk for days after the last ball – and here you come out and drag me off for the first dance, a traditional waltz, which you danced perfectly. When it turned out you were actually pretty good, I figured you may have just learned that one dance for the Tournament or something since you had to lead off the dancing. So imagine my surprise when you can dance the others just as well.”

She watched as he tried to hide his smirk behind his goblet as he took a sip. “Well, I did ask you to the ball. I didn’t want to disappoint you or leave you with some broken toes, so I made sure I could dance reasonably well,” Harry replied simply.

“Well thank you, Harry,” she replied tenderly. “It means a lot that you went through the trouble for me. You really didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” Harry told her. “I wanted to have fun, and more importantly, I wanted you to have fun.” He took another sip. “If I didn’t know how to dance, I’d probably be sitting at the table still, worrying over it, and you’d be stuck there sitting with me trying to convince me to get up for at least one dance. We’d waste away the night with that. That’s the last thing I wanted.”

Ginny glanced over at their table and, sure enough, saw both Hannah and Hermione sitting there with Neville and Ron. She knew that Neville would eventually concede and dance as much as Hannah wanted, and he would try his best, though Ginny could not help but feel bad for Hannah and her poor toes. She had no idea what she was in for. Turning her attention to her brother and Hermione, Ginny

hoped that Hermione was able to convince Ron to loosen up and dance. Ron could be incredibly stubborn when he wanted to be, and Ginny just hoped that this did not turn out to be one of those occasions. She was interrupted from her thoughts by Harry's voice. "You ready to head back out there?"

Ginny smiled dazzlingly. "Lead the way." She saw Harry's eyes flick down to her lips, and she could not stop the blush that suffused her cheeks when his tongue darted out of his mouth to glide across his lips.

She let Harry lead her back out to the dance floor and pull her in close as they began to sway to the slow tempo of the current song. She tucked her head in the crook of Harry's neck and inhaled his scent, letting out a sigh of contentment. It was shaping up to be the perfect night. For the first time in her life she was wearing robes that did not make her feel like some cast off. The meal had been excellent. The music was great. And Harry...Harry was more than she could have dreamed of.

He never ceased to surprise her. She had hoped to spend a wonderful and, dare she say it, magical evening with Harry, but he had already far surpassed her expectations in that department. He had said all the right things. The way he looked at her made her feel like she was the most beautiful girl in the world. It was like to him she was the only other person in the room. And it made her feel special to garner Harry's attention in that way.

Then there were the physical touches they had shared. They had walked arm in arm down to the Great Hall. For a while he had been holding her hand. If she was not mistaken he had rather knowingly brushed his leg against hers during dinner, and he had made a point of maintaining that contact throughout the meal. Nothing, however, compared to the feeling of being held close against him as they swayed in time to the music. The dancing in general was incredible, whether they were cutting a rug to the up-tempo songs, waltzing, or just holding each other close and swaying to the music. It was an incredible thing to be dancing with Harry. The knowledge that he had learned it all just for her made it all the more special.

More than anything else, it was Harry's smile that made the night perfect for her. She had seen many emotions on Harry's face over the years, but never before had she seen him smile the way he was smiling at her tonight. To know that she was the one to bring that about, that she was the only one he smiled at like that, well, she had never felt so cherished and so wanted in all her life.

Ginny had been wondering at Harry's feelings for a long time now. She knew that Harry cared for her and that she held a special place in his life, but she did not know exactly where she stood with him or what exactly he felt for her. Sometimes she wondered if Harry even knew the answer to that. He treated her much differently than anyone else. He was so much more open with her, but it was more than that. He was not just open, he was coming to depend on her. At the beginning of the term he had trouble accepting even the simplest of touches or comfort from her, but now he welcomed the contact.

There were so many little signs that individually would not amount to much, but all together they made her think. She could feel Harry's hands resting on the bare skin of her back, one hand running up and down her back while the other was twirling a lock of her hair, which stretched midway down her back, on one of his fingers. His hands had a tendency to wander from her waist up a couple inches to where her back was bare. She loved feeling his hands on her skin, and she hoped that he enjoyed the sensation as much as she. Before this evening she had been very confused about Harry's feelings. She had felt as though she was holding onto a fool's hope, but now it was different.

Now she felt as though she might just have been right. Maybe all those signs did add up to mean something. Maybe Harry could actually feel something for her. She squeezed him a little tighter around his neck and reveled in the feeling when Harry pulled her even more tightly against his body. Yes, this would most certainly qualify as a magical evening.

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Harry marveled in the feel of Ginny's skin underneath his hands. He decided that backless dress robes were one of the more brilliant

ideas he had encountered. He had trouble stopping his hands from wandering over her bare flesh or from curling her hair around his fingers. Every time he pulled her close his hands invariably climbed up from her waist to the bare skin of her back, and he thought he heard Ginny let out a sigh of contentment on a couple such occasions, but he also might have imagined that.

A faster song started up, and as Harry led Ginny he gradually increased their speed. He let go of Ginny's waist as he led her into a twirl, smiling and laughing along with her as they now danced at double the speed of the beat. They were drawing many curious glances, but neither cared. They continued dancing to their own beat.

"So where did you learn to dance, Harry?" Ginny asked not for the first time that night.

Harry grinned. "Why are you so interested?"

"I need to know who to thank," Ginny replied frankly.

Harry's smile widened. "You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," she challenged back as the two spun around.

"In good time," he said, leaning forward to catch her in a dip. He could not stop his eyes from flicking down to the neckline of her dress and decided he rather liked the idea of a good dip.

The next song was a slow one, and Harry pulled Ginny in close as the two began to sway in time to the music. Harry could not stop the wide smile that spread across his face as he felt Ginny's body mold against his. The fast songs were fun, but there was something about the slow songs and holding Ginny close that made Harry feel inexplicably happy and warm inside.

"So did you have fun last night?" Harry asked her quietly.

Ginny nodded into his shoulder. "It's fun playing around in animal form. I haven't spent much time as a lioness."

"We'll just have to remedy that then, won't we?" Harry returned.

"We just may," she agreed.

"Do you think you'll continue to join us?" he continued.

"I don't know," Ginny replied. "I don't want to intrude upon your time together or anything."

"You're not intruding," Harry insisted. "I enjoy having you around." Try as he might, Harry had trouble placing exactly what it was about Ginny that made him enjoy her company so much, but he could never seem to pin it down. He just loved to be with her and found himself always wanting to spend more time with her.

"But what about Prof—Remus?" Ginny persisted.

"Are you kidding?" Harry asked incredulously. "Do you have any idea how much it means to him that people are willing to even just look past his condition to see him for who he is? Well that doesn't hold a candle compared to what it means to know that he has people in his life who want to help him during that time, that are willing to stay with him and offer him some small comfort when he transforms. He'll be honoured that you want to continue to help. He left me a note in the pocket of the jacket he gave me. He wanted me to tell you how much he appreciated you being there last night."

"Well then you can count me in," Ginny replied.

"Good," Harry said happily. He was glad that she wanted to help and that it would give them an opportunity to spend additional time together and in their animal forms as well. Harry had hoped for more time to play in the forest, but things had just been so busy, for Ginny especially, that it had not been possible before the end of term. Now that term was over, there were too many people around for them to ever get a chance to slip away unnoticed.

As they continued to sway to the music, Harry scanned the crowd around them. Hermione had finally managed to drag Ron onto the dance floor. He was holding her at half an arm's length and staring at his feet as the pair danced. Harry was tempted to roll his eyes but realised that was probably exactly what he would have looked like if not for his lessons. That thought made him smirk. He could tell that Ginny was infinitely curious about where he had learned to dance. The fact that she had brought it up numerous times was indicative of that.

That thought brought Harry to search out his dance instructor. She was currently speaking to Professor Flitwick who was seated on top of the head table. As the current song faded, Harry released his tight hold on Ginny and let his hands drift from her back to her waist. He smiled as her face washed into view. "Do you mind if I dance this next one with someone else?" he asked her.

She shrugged nonchalantly. "That's fine I suppose."

"Thanks," he told her, giving her hips a slight squeeze. "I'll be back in no time."

She nodded and headed off the dance floor as Harry wound his way through the crowd to Professor McGonagall. He smiled as he made his way to the head table. "Professor McGonagall, you look lovely this evening. And good evening to you, Professor Flitwick," Harry greeted warmly.

The tiny professor greeted Harry in return as Professor McGonagall replied, "Good evening to you, Mr. Potter. I trust you're enjoying yourself?"

"Very much so, thank you," Harry replied. "I was wondering, though, if I might have the honour of this dance?" He held his hand out in invitation.

His stern instructor smiled warmly. "Indeed you may," she replied as she reached out to take his hand.

Harry led her onto the dance floor and quickly moved his hands into position and began to lead his professor. "I wanted to thank you for all the lessons," Harry told her honestly.

"The pleasure was mine, Harry," she replied. "It was a nice chance to get to know you a little better. And seeing you out here enjoying yourself so much has made it all the more worthwhile."

Harry laughed lightly. "If I had known it could be this much fun with a little preparation, I would've asked you to teach me two years ago," Harry joked.

She smiled in reply. "I daresay it is more the company than the dancing that you're enjoying so much this evening," she observed.

"You're probably right," Harry agreed with only a minimal blush as his eyes automatically sought out the source of his enjoyment of the evening. Ginny was currently standing off to the side of the dance floor talking with her dorm mates. She looked over at him and their eyes met. She cocked an eyebrow at him causing him to smile even wider. He turned his attention back to his current dance partner. "All night she's been trying to figure out where I learned to dance," he told her with an impish grin.

"I think you ruined the secret," McGonagall returned.

"Yeah, I figured letting her find out this way was more fun than just telling her," Harry admitted.

As the song was winding down to a close, Ginny made her way over to the two of them. Professor McGonagall was the first to speak. "Good evening, Miss Weasley. I trust you're enjoying yourself this evening?"

"I am, thank you," she replied. "And I'm guessing I have you to thank for that."

McGonagall smiled in reply. "Yes, I was quite surprised when Harry approached me about teaching him to dance, but he turned out to be an excellent student."

Ginny smiled warmly at Harry. "Well you taught him very well; thank you."

"You are quite welcome," the normally stern professor replied. "Well I'll leave you two to get back to the ball. Thank you for the dance, Harry."

"The pleasure was all mine," Harry replied. After a moment he turned to Ginny and held his arm out to her. She accepted his arm and the two walked off the side of the dance floor where they met Ron and Hermione. The four talked for a little while, Hermione questioning his newfound dancing ability and easily making the connection to Professor McGonagall after spotting the two of them dancing. Ron just looked at Harry funnily at that admission.

When the next dance started, Hermione dragged a willing Harry onto the dance floor where the two of them danced to an upbeat tune. He was somewhat relieved at the tempo of the song. With how upbeat it was, there was not much opportunity for conversation, nor was he required to hold Hermione close. He still was not all that comfortable with close physical contact with people, and he was still a little wary of Hermione. She had been much more agreeable since their confrontation over the weekend, but after spending the entire term avoiding her inquiries, Harry was not yet ready to acquit himself of the habit.

He just finished the following dance with Ginny when Neville and Hannah approached them. "Mind if I cut in for old time's sake?" Neville asked, not directing the question to either one of them in particular.

As Ginny accepted, Harry nodded his approval. When the two moved off to dance, Harry offered a hand to Hannah. "Care to dance?"

"I'd love to, thank you," she replied.

The two talked casually as they danced to the relatively slow tune. "So how are you enjoying the ball?" Harry asked her.

"It's a lot of fun..." she looked as though she wanted to add in a "but" to that but trailed off.

"But...your toes are killing you?" Harry offered.

She smiled and blushed as she shrugged in reply. "He's not that bad of a dancer, but my toes have suffered a bit, yes."

Harry nodded. "At least he tries," Harry said as he glanced over to Ron and Hermione who were sitting out yet another song. Indeed, the two had only danced a couple so far.

"Yes, I'm glad that he's at least willing to give it a shot. He's been great about it, though I feel bad whenever he does step on me. He's always so sorry and sincere, it's impossible to be mad at him for it," she told him.

"That sounds like Neville," Harry replied. "I don't think he'd be half as bad if he got over his nervousness. He's gotten a lot better with it over the past year, but he still gets nervous and embarrassed pretty easily. With a little confidence, he could be an entirely different person."

"I like Neville the way he is," she commented absently. "I think it's sweet that he gets so nervous."

Harry grinned. "Oh you do, huh?" Harry said, giving her a knowing look.

She blushed.

"It's alright," Harry assured her. "Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you," she replied sincerely, with a bit of relief in her voice.

“Just don’t get too discouraged or disappointed when he doesn’t catch on to how you’re feeling right away or doesn’t act on his own feelings,” Harry told her helpfully. He was pretty confident that Neville felt the same way.

She nodded her understanding for a second before her eyes bugged and locked on to his own. “His feelings?”

Harry smirked wickedly. “Oh no, you’re not getting anything out of me,” Harry laughed. He was pretty sure she already got the message.

The song soon ended. “Thank you for the dance,” Harry told her.

“It was my pleasure,” she answered back. “You’re quite a good dancer.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied. “I had a good teacher.”

“Ginny?” she questioned.

Harry shook his head. “Professor McGonagall.”

Her eyes widened at that. “Huh. Well, that’s interesting.”

Harry chuckled at her reaction. “She’s really not so bad once you get to know her. She just uses the stern demeanour to keep the students in line.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” she replied.

“Just don’t tell her you heard it from me,” Harry joked.

After a couple more dances with Ginny, Harry made note of the time and realised that it was approaching time for his last surprise of the evening. When the current song was fading, Harry squeezed Ginny’s arm and asked, “Do you want to go outside and get some fresh air?”

Ginny shrugged and said, “Sure.”

Harry offered his arm, which she gladly took, and led her through the crowd of students to the huge double doors leading to the entrance hall. From there it was a short walk to get to the doors leading to the grounds. As with the last ball, there were fairy lights set up for a short path into the grounds. Not many people were outside because of the cold, and those that did venture out for fresh air hardly stayed around for long.

As they walked into the fresh air, Harry noticed Ginny shivering beside him. He easily cast a warming charm with the hand she was holding which quickly spread through both their bodies. Ginny jumped slightly in surprise then turned a grateful smile towards Harry. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Harry replied. He led her at a slow pace through the temporary garden area and further on to the grounds. She looked at him questioningly but did not say anything.

A short distance from the castle, Harry guided her up to the top of a little hill. He took out his wand, though they both knew it was not necessary, and used it to conjure a large blanket on top of the grass. She quirked an eyebrow at him and asked, "Just what do you think is going to happen out here, Potter?"

Harry smirked mischievously. "I was thinking along the lines of a magical evening," was his playful reply. He moved to sit on the blanket and tugged lightly to get her to follow. She did so, albeit a little reluctantly. She really had no idea where this was going, not that she was not interested to find out.

Harry just looked off into the night sky, a small bemused smile upon his face. "It's a beautiful night, wouldn't you say?"

"It is," she agreed looking around at the night sky and the illuminated windows of the castle.

"I've really enjoyed spending the evening with you," he told her sincerely, taking her hand into his and intertwining their fingers.

“Me too,” she told him. “This whole night has just been wonderful. Thank you, Harry.”

Harry just smiled. He could not explain it, but he was beginning to feel like a swarm of butterflies were flying around in his stomach. He tried to squash the feeling down with minimal success. He looked back into Ginny’s face, and the feeling intensified. “The night’s not over yet,” he finally replied.

Ginny gazed questioningly into his face for a long moment before asking, “What are we doing out here, Harry?”

Harry smiled back mysteriously. “You’ll see. It should be starting any minute now.” He lay down on his back and turned his attention back to the skies above Hogwarts.

Ginny followed his gaze wonderingly but remained silent. Sure enough, not two minutes later, the show began. She stretched out beside Harry and watched as fireworks began to explode in the air. More followed, and soon the night sky was completely lit up with sparks of all colours and shapes. She scooted closer to Harry as they continued to watch the spectacle until their shoulders were touching. He responded by slipping an arm around her and giving a slight squeeze. She just burrowed in closer.

Harry smiled as he continued to watch the lights in the sky. It was the perfect end to a brilliant evening. He was with Ginny, after having spent the entire night talking, laughing, and dancing with her. They were together and alone, enjoying each other’s company and the fireworks. He really did owe the twins for providing this. He had not expected them to offer the fireworks free of charge, nor had he thought that they would offer to take care of setting them off as well. The only thing Harry had to do was send the letter out asking for their assistance.

She shifted slightly next to him. He caught a whiff of her hair and smiled at the scent. He was still unable to define exactly what her scent was. He inhaled slowly and deeply again. She smelled like...home, whatever that smelt like. He had not exactly had a home in a long time, not since he was a baby. That was probably why he

had such a difficult time placing the scent. He decided that he really liked the idea of equating Ginny with home..

He shook himself of those thoughts and concentrated on the show and the beautiful girl at his side. He squeezed her a little tighter, and she responded by snuggling closer, her head now resting on his shoulder. As the finale began, Harry's focus was torn between the sight and Ginny's hand which happened to be creeping along his chest and to his side. She gave him a light squeeze with her right arm. He returned the action smilingly, tucking her close to him.

As the last of the lights began fading from the sky, she turned to him with a coy smile on her face. "I suppose you set that up?"

"A favour from your brothers," Harry replied. "Once I brought it up, they wouldn't let me have anything to do with it."

She smiled cutely. "I'll have to remember to thank them properly." After a moment she added, "And you."

Harry gulped at the look she was giving him. He felt his whole body heat up. He licked his lips, which had suddenly gone dry. Her eyes sparkled, and Harry felt himself falling into their depths. Without consciously deciding to, he began to lean towards her. Time seemed to drag on as their faces inched closer and closer together.

And then it happened.

Harry cried out in pain and curled in on himself. His hand flew up to his scar which was suddenly flaring with a burning, searing pain. He felt the sensation of falling for a long moment, and then it stopped. When he opened his eyes, he felt sick.

In front of him, black robed wizards and witches moved from house to house. Orange and green lights erupted from within the buildings, followed by shrieks and cries of pain and agony. One man stood and watched it all, reveling in the moment. He walked through the streets and laughed cruelly at the plight of these pitiful muggles. A movement caught his attention from the corner of his eye. As he looked over, he noticed a small child hiding behind some bushes. She was probably

trying to make her way to the forest just beyond the back of the building where it would be much easier to hide.

Harry felt his lips pull into a twisted grin and could sense Voldemort's excitement as he caught her with the Imperius Curse, forcing the girl to walk out of her cover and towards him. Harry was horrified for the little girl and desperately wished he could help her in some way, but he could not. He was caught in a nightmare, a real live nightmare, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He watched, sickened, as he removed the curse. The little girl was frozen in fear. Her terror was evident enough in her eyes, but the puddle accumulating at her feet reaffirmed it.

He could feel the smile widen across his lips. "You are right to fear me," he told the girl in his snake-like hiss. Her eyes widened even more, something Harry would not have thought possible, and a moment later the girl was writhing and screaming in pain under the Cruciatus Curse. He held her under it for a very long minute. The girl did not move after he lifted the curse. Whether she was unable or just intelligent enough to play dead, Harry did not know. Harry silently prayed for Voldemort to leave the girl and walk away. He was surprised to hear his prayers answered in the form of Voldemort's hissing laughter. "How nice of you to join us, Harry. I do hope you are enjoying the festivities. It's a pity you won't be able to save the girl." With that he turned his attention back to the little girl lying in a heap at his feet and hissed, "Avada Kedavra." Harry felt ill at the warped pleasure he could feel coursing through Voldemort.

Harry struggled with everything he had to break the connection with Voldemort. He did not know where they were, but he thought if he could get back to his body, he just might be able to find them in time to help. All his effort was for naught. No matter how hard he tried, he could not escape. He felt Voldemort's amusement at his plight, and he thought the snake might actually be trying to contain him to force him to watch more.

Harry was helpless and could only watch in silent horror as unspeakable events occurred all around him. He witnessed Death Eaters torturing and toying with defenseless muggles of all ages. He was revolted by their laughter and enjoyment of the horror and pain

they inflicted upon their victims. He would expect Voldemort to feel a sick pleasure, but he had never imagined the rest of the Death Eaters were equally twisted and perverted. The realisation sickened and angered him all the more. Worse still were the feelings of enjoyment he could feel coursing through Voldemort. It left Harry feeling inexorably dirty.

The worst of what he was forced to witness was not the torture the Death Eaters or Voldemort inflicted on the muggles. Oh no, it was not enough for them to cause the pain and horror themselves; they took great pleasure and enjoyment in using the Imperius Curse to force family members to inflict the torturous acts on each other. Harry did not think he would ever escape the echoes of the desperate pleas of the children nor the uncomprehending, horrified looks they gave to their parents or siblings as they endured the various cruelties. They did not know what the Imperius Curse was nor how it affected people. They could not comprehend why their family members were torturing them so mercilessly. Harry pitied the ones who were left alive, forced to live with the memories.

Eventually, after what felt like hours, Voldemort had just finished killing off a mother and her baby when he hissed out "Happy Christmas, Harry Potter."

A/N: -Ducks- I'm sorry? That's not going to cut it, is it? Ruby asks that you please spare my life. She didn't say anything about bodily harm, so I guess that still leaves you some options. Can I just ask that you spare my eyes and my hands so that I can continue writing to try to make it up to you? You make no promises? Well, I guess I can't ask for more than that.

Okay, I'm done being a dork. Nah, I'm never done being a dork. But anyway, thank you all for reading. You can feel free to join my Yahoo Group (link found in my bio page) for discussions, update notices, and the Teaserette Guessing Game. Thanks – Matt

Chapter 16: A Dual-Pronged Attack

Ronald Weasley was sitting next to his date, Hermione Granger, at the Yule Ball. He rather liked the sound of that; Hermione Granger was his date. He had wanted to ask her the moment the ball had been announced, but her response concerned him. He was not sure she would want to go with him and worried that if he asked and she said no, it would have made their friendship awkward. Luckily, that had not been an issue. She had eagerly agreed to go with him and was now his date. He wondered if she was having a good time. He wished he had shown more interest when his mum had tried to teach him how to dance. At the time it had seemed a pointless waste of energy, but now that he was at the ball with Hermione, the idea did not seem quite so trivial.

Ron's eyes drifted across the dance floor and locked onto his little sister and best mate. He could not believe Harry had learned to dance, and from McGonagall at that. That had to be awkward. Still, he had learned to dance and was ruddy good at it too. Hermione had commented on his dancing several times throughout the night, and, while he could not deny Harry's ability, that did not mean she had to keep mentioning it.

His eyes narrowed slightly at the couple. Harry and Ginny had been dancing all night long, and, despite what Harry might have said, they looked anything but innocent. Harry was holding Ginny rather closely, and they had been looking at each other funnily all night. He really was not sure what to think. What if they became a couple? What if he saw them snogging? A shiver ran down his spine at the thought. Then again, they both looked so happy. Should he not be happy for them? His eyes followed them as they walked off the dance floor towards the double doors leading to the Entrance Hall. Where did they think they were going?

His thoughts were interrupted by his own date. Ron sighed. He really did not want to dance, but he knew Hermione did. After all, she had been asking him to dance all night. He had given in a couple times already and had hoped that would satisfy her, but he was not that lucky. Taking a deep breath, he turned to Hermione who was again

trying to coax him onto the dance floor. "Alright, Hermione," he relented.

She smiled gratefully and led him by the hand to the dance floor. He awkwardly placed one arm at her waist, the other Hermione kept cupped in her own hand. He did his best to keep up with her and not step on her toes from that part forward. Not really enjoying the actual dancing, he looked to his partner, the reason he was on the dance floor. He smiled; he supposed he could suffer through it if it made her happy. She returned his smile, causing his stomach to jolt.

Now that his eyes had left his feet and traveled to Hermione, he found he could not tear his eyes away. He felt he should say something but struggled to find an appropriate topic. He did not want to embarrass himself, first and foremost, so he tried to find something he could compliment her on that would not put himself out there too much. A moment later, he found his target. "That's a pretty necklace," he told her honestly. It was on a silver chain, with a silver pendant holding some sort of blue stone. Jewelry was not exactly his area of expertise, but the necklace looked beautiful on her.

Hermione blushed and stammered out, "Th-thanks."

Something about her reaction puzzled Ron. She looked nervous and almost...guilty? It was a foreign look on Hermione because she hardly ever did anything to feel guilty about, but Ron had seen the look enough times on his siblings and other people to recognize it. He wondered why she should possibly feel guilty. After all, it was only a necklace. His curiosity began to get the better of him. "I don't think I've ever seen you wear it before. Was it a present?"

She nodded uncomfortably. "From your parents?" he assumed.

She hesitated a moment before shaking her head. "No."

Ron puzzled over that for a moment. If not from her parents, then who? "Who gave it to you?" he asked curiously.

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably under Ron's questions, only making him all the more curious. She did not respond right away.

“Hermione?” Ron asked tentatively, wondering what was bothering her so much.

She sighed. “It was a present from Viktor,” she finally answered.

Ron froze, and Hermione had no choice but to stop dancing as well. Ron's face flushed a deep shade of red in anger and resentment. “So Vicky sends you presents then, does he?” he spat. He could just imagine that Bulgarian pillock slipping his arms around her neck to clasp the necklace.

“Most friends tend to do that for each other,” Hermione retorted, her face reddening in indignation.

“Oh yeah?” Ron returned, his voice rising. It felt like his face was on fire, and his chest felt constricted. Images of his fourth year flooded into his mind. Hermione and Krum were out on the dance floor. His arms were wrapped tightly around her waist; she wore a bright smile as she looked up into his eyes. Ron vigorously shook his head to clear the images. “And do all your friends give you jewelry?” he demanded. “I don’t know why you agreed to even come with me. You should have just asked Vicky to come with you. I’m sure he would have dropped everything to come be with you.”

He did not wait for her response but stormed off the dance floor and out of the Great Hall. Ron moved through the halls in a long stride. He was not particularly paying attention to where he was going. He went up several staircases, down several corridors. He eventually stopped in front of a suit of armour, turned, and punched the breast plate with all his might. The action did nothing to soothe his anger. In fact, the pain now throbbing through his hand only served to make him angrier and more frustrated.

Why did he ever let himself think he stood a chance with her? What could she possibly see in him, especially when she could have someone like Krum? What could he ever offer her? He was upset with Hermione and furious with Krum, but he was mostly just angry at himself. He should have known better. He did know better; he just let

his feelings for Hermione cloud his better judgment. He paced back and forth in front of the suit of armour for a couple minutes before stopping and leaning against the wall across from the armour. He slowly sank down the wall until he was sitting on the cold, stone floor. He cradled his right hand in his lap, wincing at the pain. He remained sitting there for a while, he had no idea how long, before he finally stood up and trudged his way back up to Gryffindor Tower.

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Dumbledore watched his students dancing and laughing and enjoying themselves and smiled to himself. The Yule Ball really had been an excellent idea. He would have to remember to thank Minerva for thinking of it. He had made a point to keep a close watch on Harry throughout the night to gauge how he was handling things. He was most happy to see that the boy was able to lay aside his worries and enjoy himself. Indeed, he and Miss Weasley seemed to be having quite a time together.

He had wondered where Harry had learned to dance like that. His relatives had obviously not taught him, and he had not danced during the last ball. He guessed that he had learned specifically for this night, perhaps to impress the young Miss Weasley. He had been dancing with Minerva during the first dance when Harry first showcased his newfound talent, and he did not miss the proud look his own dance partner shot the boy. He smiled, glad to see that Harry found himself comfortable enough to learn to dance from her. Most students were afraid of the stern head of Gryffindor, and not without good reason. But she really was a soft and kind-hearted woman underneath her exterior. Only a rare student ever cracked through it to see the real Minerva.

He noticed when Harry and Miss Weasley left the hall, but he was not worried. The two had been dancing most of the night and most likely desired some fresh air. If they desired privacy as well, he was not going to intrude on them. Indeed, he thought it might be good for Harry, for the both of them. Everyone could use an extra source of comfort in these times.

He also noticed with disappointment the argument and fallout between Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. He sighed. He, like everyone else in the castle, knew that those two had been dancing around each other for years, figuratively speaking, of course. He chuckled to himself as he pictured them literally dancing around each other as they argued. He had hoped that the ball would serve to bring them closer together and had thought that it was working. Apparently he was mistaken. His eyes drifted around the rest of the hall, taking in all the dancing couples. He could see smiles and looks of affection being passed between friends and dates. But most of all, he could see the majority of his students all safe from the perils of the war raging outside the gates of Hogwarts.

He shifted his gaze upward as he saw the students start to shift their attentions to the ceiling and was as surprised as the rest of the school's population, both student and faculty, when the night sky, mirrored on the ceiling of the Great Hall, lit up with the bright, colourful sparks of fireworks. He immediately recognized some of them as the work of Messrs. Fred and George Weasley. As he watched the show in unabashed enjoyment, he silently wondered whether the display had been their own initiative or a favour for another. Nevertheless, he was grateful for it. It did make the evening seem a little more magical.

As the last of the lights died down, he felt more than sensed Professor McGonagall approach. "Good evening, Minerva," he greeted warmly. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"It was an unexpected but certainly pleasant touch," she commented complimentarily. Her tone seemed to indicate that she assumed he was the one responsible for it.

"Indeed, I shall have to remember to thank the Weasley twins and whoever may have convinced them to do it," he returned mildly.

"You mean you didn't know?" the professor asked in surprise.

"I was as surprised and delighted as everyone else," he told her.

“Hmm,” she answered noncommittally. After a moment of silence, she spoke. “Well I can easily narrow the number of candidates down to four,” she mused aloud. “Miss Granger seems the least likely. She has never been fond of the Weasley twins’ antics, and she would ask for permission first. Mr. Weasley doesn’t strike me as the type to set something like this up. Besides, as he stormed out of here in a fit of anger not long before they began, I think it is safe to count him out.”

She paused as she thought over the last two possibilities. “It’s hard to choose the more likely between Harry and Miss Weasley.” He did not miss her informal reference to the boy. “Last year, I would have easily chosen Miss Weasley as the more likely, but Mr. Potter went to great pains to make sure this would be a fun evening for both himself and his date. I’d be more inclined to think he set this up.”

“Indeed,” the Headmaster replied. “I think you might just be right. Harry has seemed much livelier and upbeat this term, wouldn’t you say?” he asked, genuinely interested in hearing her response. He was sure she had been the one to teach him to dance, especially after seeing Harry approach her and lead her out to the dance floor. He had not been aware that was going on, and he was curious as to what information he could garner from his trusted colleague and friend about the boy who was so important to their cause.

“I would have to agree,” she replied easily. “I must admit I had expected him to take the loss of Sirius hard. I had been fully prepared to find a depressed and sullen boy who was lost in the world. Instead I found a mature young man, confronting his loss and pain and stepping into his role as an adult. I’m not ashamed to admit I’ve kept my eye on him. He has had his moments where things have gotten to him; in particular he seemed to have been at odds with Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger for a time. It is only natural that he would feel the loss as the distance grows between them. I fear that as he grows up, he is growing apart from his friends. Normally I wouldn’t be bothered as that happens often, but his friends are the only real family he has,” she said, and he noticed her eyes hardening at her last statement. He had hoped that she might one day see things from his point of view, but it appeared she would never quite forgive him for leaving Harry with his aunt and uncle.

She continued, "But I have also noticed him growing closer to Miss Weasley. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if she's already replaced Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger as his best friend. Mr. Longbottom seems to be much closer to him and the others as well."

Dumbledore nodded absently. He already knew all of this. He was hoping he could glean something new from her. He was rather surprised that she had not been forthcoming with how much time she had been spending with Harry, with his dancing lessons and all. He would have to talk to her about that but knew that now was neither the time nor place for that conversation.

They stood together companionably, watching over their charges as they danced the night away. It was some time later, with only about fifteen minutes left until the end of the ball, when they heard loud noises coming from the entrance hall. The two professors glanced worriedly towards each other before setting off to investigate the commotion.

OoOoO

Ginny was frantic with worry. She had only once before seen Harry in the throes of a vision. She had not known what to do then and felt even more helpless now. Harry was thrashing around wildly as if trying to escape from something. One hand kept flying up to his scar which had turned a livid red, a stark contrast to his now pallid face. She tried to get close to him but had to back away to avoid his flailing limbs. She crawled behind him and approached him from his head. She was able to get close enough to reach his head and ran her fingers through his hair. She inched a little closer to make the action easier and sat directly above his head. She kept one hand in his hair and pressed the other over his scar.

She had to duck her head to avoid Harry's arm, but she remained firm, holding the one hand over his scar while the other alternated between running through his hair and brushing softly across his cheek. He slowly began to calm a little, and she lifted his head up off the ground and scooted underneath it, letting his head rest in her lap. She continued her ministrations as Harry occasionally kicked or jolted

slightly. While his head shook from side to side, his motions were calmer, and she was in less danger of getting hit.

She lost track of time sitting there with him and was nearly startled out of her wits when Harry suddenly popped right up off her lap. He scrambled onto his knees with his back turned to her, and Ginny heard him start retching. She crawled behind him and knelt beside him. She reached out with her right hand and began rubbing his back in soothing circles, hoping the gesture would give him some comfort. She could feel the tears brimming in her eyes as she watched Harry continue to heave long after his stomach was emptied.

His stomach eventually settled down, and Harry turned to her. Tears were streaming down his face, and his normally bright, green eyes were dull and haunted. Their eyes connected for just a moment before a hard sob shook his body. She opened her arms to him, and he collapsed into her, sobbing openly now. Ginny absently noticed the tears now streaming down her own cheeks, but she ignored them. One arm rubbed Harry's back while the other cradled his head into her chest, her fingers absently running through his hair. She neither knew nor cared how long they stayed there.

As his tears finally began to slow and his body began to relax, she guided his head down to her lap, all the while still running her fingers through his hair comfortingly and cooing words of encouragement to him. She wanted to get a decent look at him. What she saw did not make her feel any better. Only two times before had she seen Harry anywhere near this distraught. The first time had been shortly after Voldemort's resurrection in the hospital wing. The second time had been after Sirius had died. Whatever Harry had witnessed was obviously going to leave more scars. Now she would have to see what she could do to help him. She really wished she had some clue on how to comfort him.

Not knowing what else she could do, she continued to murmur softly to him, trying to tell him that he was safe, that everything would be all right. The words sounded hollow even to her own ears, but she hoped that he might find some comfort in them. While one hand continued its ministrations in his hair, the other sought out one of his own hands. When they made contact, she gave him a gentle squeeze,

and that was all the invitation he needed to latch on. He held onto her hand tightly, though not painfully.

It was several more minutes before she even considered what to do next. They could not stay out there all night. Had they been in the common room, she would have been content to stay that way all night, providing whatever comfort she could. But Harry's warming charms would give out eventually, and she knew people would grow worried if they did not return to Gryffindor Tower tonight.

Resigning herself, she chose to bring it up with Harry. "What do you say we get you back up to the Tower? We can stop by the hospital wing and pick up a dreamless sleep potion if you'd like," she offered, knowing he would probably have trouble getting a decent night's rest without the aid.

He nodded mutely in her lap, to which question she was not sure. He also did not seem in any hurry to get up. She sighed tiredly, wishing with all her heart there was something more she could do for him. Mustering up what little energy she had, she shifted Harry to sit him up so that they could begin making their way back to the castle.

After a couple minutes, she had him standing. As they began their trek, she kept an arm around his waist, both to steady and lead him. He did not seem aware of his surroundings. After a minute, she took his arm and slid it across her shoulders, making it much easier to keep him upright and on track. They lumbered across the lawn and back into the light of the entrance hall.

People immediately took notice and began asking questions. She was not in the mood to deal with them and was just getting ready to start hexing her way through the crowd when a familiar voice parted its way through the crowd.

"What's going on here? What's all the commotion?" Hermione Granger demanded as she fought her way through the crowd gathered around Harry and Ginny. When she finally found her way through to the center and took in their wretched state, she turned to the students gathered around. "Alright, everybody move out! Nothing

to see here!" When nobody seemed inclined to move, she reverted to her authority as a prefect. "Get out of here now before I start taking points and giving detentions!" she shouted forcefully.

The crowd listened. It did not occur to anyone that she lacked the authority to back up her entire threat. Satisfied, she turned her attention to her two friends. "What happened?" she asked in concern.

Ginny frowned. "He had a vision, I think. An awful one from the looks of it. I'm taking him up to the hospital wing to get a dreamless sleep potion," she told the girl as she started to stride forward again.

"Oh no you're not," Hermione commanded, stepping into her way. "He needs to tell Professor Dumbledore first. Whatever happened, he'll need to know about it."

Harry shivered, the only indication that he heard what was being said. Ginny saw red, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "Get out of my way," she demanded in a low, icy tone.

"No," Hermione refused. "He needs to tell Professor Dumbledore what he saw. It could be important."

"Harry is not going to be forced to relive whatever he just saw," Ginny informed her in a deadly serious tone. "Not by you, Dumbledore, or anyone else."

"I know how you feel, but..." Hermione maintained bravely, refusing to budge.

With her one free hand, Ginny whipped out her wand. "Move out of the way, Hermione."

The girl's eyes widened, but she stood her ground. "You wouldn't hex me," she stated. It was unclear who she was trying to convince.

It was at this moment that Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore strode through the double doors leading to the Great Hall. Professor McGonagall spoke first. "Miss Weasley, why do you have your wand

trained on Miss Granger?" she demanded with conviction. Her tone changed entirely to one of concern as she added, "And what is wrong with Mr. Potter?"

Hermione was the first to respond. "Harry had a vision, and I was trying to explain to Ginny that Harry needed to tell Professor Dumbledore about it before she put him to bed and gave him a dreamless sleep potion." Her tone of voice spoke of Ginny as though she were a simple child who needed reprimanding causing Ginny's grip on her wand to tighten and her eyes to narrow further.

McGonagall seemed to be trying to take in this piece of information, so it was Dumbledore that spoke next. "That does not explain why Miss Weasley has her wand trained on you."

"Miss Weasley," Ginny responded scathingly, "is not going to sit around and watch you force Harry to relive whatever nightmare he just went through. She is taking Harry up to bed to get some rest. Anybody who wants to stop me is welcome to try," she bit out in righteous anger, already beginning to trudge towards the stairs leading to the hospital wing. Her only concern at the moment was Harry, and she had no patience for anyone else.

When Hermione moved to intercept her yet again, Dumbledore's voice stopped her just in time to save her from the hex that was about to roll off Ginny's tongue. "I don't believe it would be wise to detain Miss Weasley any further," he suggested. Hermione froze in her tracks, and Ginny continued on her way barely paying them any heed.

She managed to guide Harry up the stairs to the hospital wing, where she convinced Madame Pomfrey to produce a goblet of the potion. Harry's journey ended there, as Madame Pomfrey insisted he stay for the night.

She helped the matron manoeuvre Harry into a bed. As she watched Harry down the goblet offered to him by Madame Pomfrey, Ginny's energy left her like air out of a popped balloon. She collapsed into a chair at his bedside and watched as Harry succumbed to the soporific effects of the potion.

After a minute Madame Pomfrey turned her attention to Ginny. "You look like you might be in need of some dreamless sleep as well, Miss Weasley."

Ginny turned expressionless eyes to the matron. She considered protesting. She was so exhausted she doubted it was necessary. On the other hand, it was probably the only ticket she had for staying in the hospital wing with Harry. She did not want to leave anybody the opportunity to ambush him with questions when he woke up. Coming to a decision, Ginny nodded her head. "You're probably right. Do you have something I can change into? I don't want to sleep in these robes."

Madame Pomfrey nodded affirmatively and left to gather some pyjamas and another goblet of potion. When she returned, Ginny took the offered garment and slipped behind a screen to change. A couple minutes later she emerged in the crisp hospital garments with her dress slung over her arm. She crawled into the bed next to Harry's without being directed. Not two minutes later she was drifting into her own drug-induced sleep.

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"There you are," he called out in exasperation. "Finally. I've been trying to reach you all night." When his godson came into full view, Sirius took a good look at him; he did not like what he saw. Harry looked tired and drawn. His eyes were dull and refused to meet his own. The smile was absent from his face. "How're you doing, kiddo?" Sirius asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," Harry mumbled, gaze directed at Sirius's feet.

"Anyone ever tell you that you have a rather distorted definition of 'fine?'" Sirius retorted with just a hint of frustration.

Harry finally looked up to meet his eyes. "Yeah," he said softly. "Once or twice."

“Good.” He took a step towards Harry, unsure how to comfort him. He finally just opened his arms up and said, “Come here.” He watched Harry with trepidation, uncertain how he would react. Relief flooded through his body when, after a moment, Harry stepped forward. Sirius wrapped his arms around his godson, holding him tightly. He felt Harry stiffen momentarily at the embrace and wondered if this had been the best idea. Harry’s body soon relaxed and his arms slid around Sirius’s back.

They stood there for a long minute before Sirius began to loosen his grip on Harry, and the two took a step back from each other. “So how are you really doing?”

Harry shrugged, running a hand through his hair. Sirius was surprised as he noticed for the first time that Harry had cut it short again, but he knew now was not the time to comment on it. “I don’t know,” Harry answered after a moment. He met Sirius’s gaze squarely, and he knew Harry had answered honestly. “I just – I don’t know.”

Sirius nodded in understanding, his mind churning rapidly. He lacked experience at this sort of thing and was unsure how to comfort Harry. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked tentatively.

Harry heaved a weary sigh. “Not really,” he said, and Sirius felt some of his hopes crumbling. He did not want Harry to retreat into himself and begin brooding over this, but he could not exactly force him to talk about it. Harry’s eyes clouded over, his gaze becoming vacant. After a long moment of silence, Harry shook his head slightly and said, “There’s not really much to say, is there?” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and shuffled his feet. “It’s over and done with, and there’s nothing I can do about it now.”

Sirius nodded absently, racking his brain for some way to help Harry. Well, bluntness was always his specialty, and it tended to work on James. “That’s one way to look at it, but don’t think for one second I’m buying your blasé attitude. Are you okay with everything you saw?”

Sirius watched Harry’s eyes widen a fraction and his jaw set. “Am I okay with what I saw?” he asked incredulously. “No I am bloody-well-

not okay with what I saw! Merlin, Sirius,” he cried out, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “They tortured and murdered entire families, women and children, and they laughed about it. It was fun for them. I am not okay with that; I never will be.”

Well, at least he had gotten a reaction, Sirius reflected. He took a step forward and gripped Harry’s shoulders firmly. “I don’t imagine most people would be okay after watching that, and I don’t expect you to be. But I don’t know what to do to help you.” He looked deep into Harry’s eyes and willed his godson to see his sincerity. “If you need to talk, I’m here. For as long as I can be, I’ll be here to lend an ear, and even after I’ve passed fully on to the other side, I’ll always be there with you, watching over you.”

He watched as Harry’s face fell and felt a pang in his heart. “You’re not going anywhere soon,” Harry said, the accusation evident in his tone. After a moment of silence he added beseechingly, “Are you?”

Sirius heaved a heavy sigh and squeezed Harry’s shoulders. “I’ve got a little bit of time left in me, I think. But the truth is, I have no idea exactly how much time I have. Lately I’ve begun to feel a bit of a pull, and, well, I just don’t know. I’ll be here for as long as I can be; I promise you that.”

Harry stepped forward and wrapped his arms around him, and Sirius immediately returned the gesture, holding onto his godson tightly. He wished he could be the one to be there for Harry in this tough time, but that was impossible. It was time for someone else to look after Harry; he would just have to make sure Harry let her in before he passed over to the other side.

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Harry hugged his godfather tightly. For the first time in a long time, he fully acknowledged that Sirius was dead and that he would have to say goodbye. Realising that their time together was running short, Harry decided that he better make the best of the time they had. He pulled back from Sirius and asked, “Do you think you could just tell me some stories about my parents and the Marauders?”

Sirius smiled widely at him. "I think I can do that," he said, a self-assured edge to his voice. They settled onto a sofa together as Sirius set into the task of relating the tales of the Marauders to Harry. Every so often Harry would interrupt with a question, but for the most part he was content to sit back and listen as his godfather exuberantly described all the trouble he used to get into with James, Remus, and Peter. He did not hold back on the stories of his father's many failed attempts to land a date with one Lily Evans. Sirius spent the rest of the night regaling Harry with stories, assuring Harry that there was plenty more where that came from. Harry just smiled contentedly. His godfather's stories had quite successfully taken his mind off the vision from the previous night and left him feeling fulfilled. He felt like he was finally getting to know his parents, even if indirectly.

Some time later Harry's eyes blinked open for half a moment before clamping shut against the brightness. He groaned and tentatively opened his eyes again, squinting to give his eyes a chance to adjust to the light before opening them fully. When his brain registered where he was he groaned again. He thought he just might be able to escape the hospital wing this year. Apparently not.

He laid there for a minute trying to remember what had happened and how he had ended up in the hospital wing. Suddenly it all came rushing back to him. Voldemort...Death Eaters...families – children...murder, torture. He curled into himself and clamped his eyes shut on the tears that wanted to fall. He waged a desperate battle with himself for control over his emotions.

He reluctantly began to relax his mind as he had done every night since the summer. He imagined all the trunks in his mind and decided a new one might be in order. A trunk for things he never, under any circumstances, wanted to look at ever again. Dreading what he knew he needed to do, Harry decided to take care of the rest of his memories of the evening first. He could only hope that the happiness of the rest of the evening would be able to drown out the agony of his vision.

Unfortunately, it did not have quite the effect he had hoped for. It did cheer him up marginally. After all, he had been having an incredible time with Ginny. It was certainly worthy to be sorted in with the rest of

his Patronus memories. The problem was that he could not stop thinking back to the vision, clouding over the good times he had had with Ginny. It only got worse the closer he came to the end of the night. By the time he made it to the fireworks, his mind was almost completely focused on what he knew was coming. And all too soon, he had come to the vision.

He remained unaware that tears leaked down his face as he began moving the memory into the new trunk. He whimpered which drew the attention of the witch sitting in the next bed. Harry, eyes closed and mind focused on other things, did not notice Ginny walk up to his bed. He did not feel it when she rubbed his cheek or curled his still short hair around her finger. He did not know it when she took his hand and gave it a slight squeeze, trying to offer him whatever small comfort she could.

He did not consciously know any of that. All he knew at the time was that the pain and sadness were suddenly slightly less terrible. He had been lost in the vision, but now he was able to focus back on the task at hand, and it was only a moment later when he finally locked the trunk, closing his mind off from the brunt of the memory. He sagged with relief.

“Oh, Harry,” a quiet female voice sniffled.

Harry’s eyes shot open. “Ginny!” he exclaimed upon seeing her. He noticed she was wearing a hospital gown. “Did you stay here too?” he asked worriedly. “Did something happen to you?”

Ginny nodded slowly. “I did stay here, but nothing happened to me. I was just exhausted and...didn’t want to leave you alone,” she trailed off at the last, but Harry was still able to hear her.

He gave her hand a squeeze. “Thanks,” he said in a whisper. Then, louder, “I suppose you’re the one who brought me up here then?”

She nodded. “You don’t remember?”

“It’s all kind of fuzzy after...” He could not bring himself to say it.

Ginny gave his hand another squeeze. "It's understandable. I brought you straight up here and had Madame Pomfrey give you a dreamless sleep potion. After you fell asleep, she decided I looked a bit peaky as well, offered to give me some, and let me stay here. I didn't feel much like walking back up to Gryffindor Tower and facing anybody."

Harry nodded absently. "Thank you," he told her. He sat up in bed and withdrew his hand from hers. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and dropped onto his feet. "I think I'm going to go to the Room of Requirement."

Ginny's face screwed up in thought for a moment. "To train?" she asked him.

Harry shrugged. "I need to do something."

She nodded understandingly. "Do you want some company?"

Harry thought it over for a moment. He really was not opposed to her company at all, but he needed to train and relieve some of his anger and frustration. That was not exactly the ideal time for a visit. "I don't imagine I'll be too sociable."

"I don't mind," she insisted.

He shrugged. "Come on, then."

They made it to the corridor in short order, and Harry quickly paced in front of the appropriate blank stretch of wall. As soon as the door appeared, he flung it open and strode inside. Ginny followed him. Once she had taken a few steps into the room, Harry turned around and with an outstretched hand caused the door to slam behind her. He noticed her flinch slightly.

He did not pay it any mind, however. Instead, he turned back to the centre of the room as a dummy appeared before him. He strode towards it, and once he was within reach, punched it as hard as he could. As Harry's hand made contact, the dummy's head snapped

back with a ripping sound. It did not spring back up. Harry then sent the dummy flying with a kick to its midsection.

He turned around to find two new dummies behind him. Not wasting any time, he started laying into the one on his right. After just three strikes it was torn asunder. Turning to the other dummy, he just jabbed his left hand, palm opened, towards it, causing a ball of fire to streak towards it, engulfing the dummy in flames. Three more dummies appeared behind him to take more of his abuse.

He continued on in that vain with the amount of new dummies steadily increasing every time he managed to vanquish them all until twelve appeared at once. He let out a primal cry and let his magic go, sending out a shockwave that brought down all of them at once. He immediately sank down to his knees in exhaustion. No new dummies materialized.

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Ginny, who had watched the entire spectacle in amazement and dismay, walked slowly over to Harry's crumpled form. She approached him carefully, making just enough noise to alert him of her presence so as not to startle him. She had been careful to keep her distance from him up until that point and even despite the wide berth had felt the last shockwave of raw, magical energy. She did not think it would be wise to give him reason to panic, even for a moment. When she reached him, she knelt down beside him and placed her hand comfortingly on his back. She inched her way up to his neck where she soothingly ran her fingers through his still shortened hair.

For several minutes Harry made no sign that he even knew she was there. As she knelt there doing her best to comfort him, she noticed that he had worked up quite a sweat. And he was practically lying on the stone floor. When she felt him shiver, she decided that it was time to get him off the floor. She wished she had a sofa she could get him onto, and one appeared right before her.

She turned back to Harry. "Come on, Harry," she said. "Let's get you off the floor. There's a sofa right here. Alright?" She put her arm under his and pulled him up and towards the sofa; he reluctantly

followed suit. When she got him on the sofa, she sat beside him and guided his head into her lap where she continued to stroke the hair at the nape of his neck. When he shivered again, she thought a blanket might be nice, and one appeared thrown over the arm of the sofa right beside her. She lifted the blanket, unfolded it, and threw it over Harry, folding it back to his shoulders to reveal his head.

“Thanks,” he mumbled almost incoherently.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” she replied. She was glad to know that he was still with her. She had not been sure if he had gotten lost in his memories much as he had the night before. She was also happy to note that he was well aware of her attempts to provide him some comfort, and he was not pushing her away as he had done in the past. After a couple minutes of silence she softly asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Harry shook his head in her lap and murmured, “No.” She decided it was best not to push the issue. If he wanted to talk, he knew he could. Otherwise, she would just sit with him for as long as it took. It was Boxing Day; she had nowhere to be and nothing to do.

He was silent for several minutes, lying on his back with his head turned to the side to look out into the room. He shifted suddenly, rolling towards her onto his side so that he was staring into her robes and began to talk. He told her what he had seen. He avoided any details, wanting to spare her the nightmares they were likely to cause. She took his hand with one of hers as she continued to stroke his hair with the other.

“The most disgusting thing was the fact that they were all enjoying it,” Harry spat out. “It’s not just Voldemort; they all enjoyed it. The Death Eaters were laughing and playing. It was fun for them. They didn’t care about their victims at all; they treated them as if they were lower than animals with no thoughts or feelings.”

She did not know what to say to that. “I used to always think it was just Voldemort,” Harry continued after a moment. “I thought he was the evil one, and the rest just got caught up and things spiraled out of

control. But that's not the way it is. They're all evil. They all enjoy causing pain and ruining lives. It's sick."

She racked her brain for something to say, anything to make him feel just the tiniest bit better, but there was nothing. How do you attempt to cheer up someone who has just been witness to murder, torture, and rape to that scale? How could she ever make him feel better about what he had witnessed? She knew that even after the war was over and the attacks stopped, these memories would likely haunt him for the rest of his life. Only once in her life had she ever felt so utterly helpless, and she had sworn she would never let it happen again if it was in her power to stop it. Unfortunately, it was not.

So she did the best thing she could do. She held him. She would be his anchor and listen, but she would not pretend like things were okay. She would not try to cheer him up or give him some false hope that things would be alright. She knew better, as Harry would hate such insincerity. It might be appropriate for a frightened child, but adults still attempted to soothe them with such patronizing techniques, and it always drove her nuts. Sometimes there was nothing you could do to make someone feel better, and you needed to recognize and accept it; otherwise, you just end up making things worse. Her parents might not listen, but she would learn from their mistakes.

She pondered how she had spent the last several months worrying about classes and tests and grades; all of that seemed trivial now. Then she looked at Harry who had spent the majority of the term training, preparing for war. The rest of the castle could pretend as if there was no war being waged outside the safety of the castle walls, but she could not. Not any more.

Ginny understood that the stakes had just been raised. Harry was already right in the middle of it. Her family would not be far behind. She was sick of sitting on the sidelines. She refused to sit back and watch as others fought this war for her. She would not stand idle as Harry suffered without actively trying to help. She could not erase the trauma he had lived through, but she could fight and help put an end to the war. She resolved to follow Harry's example. School did not seem important anymore. OWLs meant nothing. War was upon them. It was time for her to start training.

OoOoO

They did not leave the Room of Requirement until lunch time. Ginny offered to go to the kitchens with him if he wanted to avoid the Great Hall, but he reluctantly turned down the offer knowing he would have to face everyone sooner or later. Harry had finally changed out of his dress robes into spare robes stored in his trunk. He had shrunk and leant Ginny one of his school robes to wear over her hospital gown. They entered the Great Hall side by side and walked to the Gryffindor table together. They sat down with their friends who seemed to be eating in relative silence. Ginny sat next to Ron and across from Hermione. Neville was across from Ron. Harry sat next to Ginny, the spots across from and on the other side of him were empty. It was nearing the end of the meal and much of the hall had already cleared out.

"Where the bloody hell have you two been?" Ron demanded hotly the second they sat on the bench. "You didn't come back to the tower last night. Stay out all night, did you? Oh, of course not, because you're just friends. If I hear you laid one finger on my sister..."

"Oh shut up, Ronald Weasley," Hermione cut in. "I came to visit you two in the hospital wing this morning, but you were both gone. Madame Pomfrey was furious. She said you left without even letting her know, never mind getting her permission. Just where have you been?" She looked at the two of them expectantly.

"Hospital wing?" Ron muttered in confusion, looking back and forth between Hermione and Harry.

Harry shrugged and looked to Ginny, so she spoke up. "We just needed to get out of there," she said by way of explanation as she began to fill her plate. When she noticed Harry was not following suit, she proceeded to fill his plate as well.

"That doesn't answer my question," Hermione retorted. "Where were you two?" Harry ignored her and stared at his food. He picked up his fork and began pushing things around. Ginny rolled her eyes and began eating, also pointedly ignoring the question. "Well?"

Hermione demanded. "I can always take points and give you detentions for leaving the hospital wing without permission," she threatened.

"Actually you can't," Harry finally spoke up.

"What's to stop me?" Hermione fired back.

"You're overstepping your authority," Harry explained dispassionately, looking up from his plate to meet her gaze. "Madame Pomfrey is more than capable of taking points and assigning out detentions on her own. The final say in the matter is hers since we were under her discretion at the time. Beyond that, you're only a prefect. You don't have the authority to dole out punishments to professors. Nor do you have the authority to punish Ginny since she was with me."

He turned back to his food and tentatively took a bite of his sandwich. He began chewing much more thoroughly than was necessary as Hermione huffed in indignation across the table. "Thank you Harry," Ginny said beside him. His only response was to give her a small half-smile.

"Fine then, don't tell us where you were," Hermione shrilly conceded. "It's not like you tell us anything anymore anyway."

A loud thump shook the table as Neville slammed his hand down. "Would you knock it off already?" he demanded of Hermione. "Why do you think that Harry has to share every single thing that happens to him with you? Do you tell him every intimate detail of your life? I know for a fact you don't. I seem to remember a certain event I stumbled upon after the last Yule Ball that you swore me to secrecy on, telling me I couldn't talk to Harry or Ron or anybody else about it. So why don't you climb on down from that pedestal you've built yourself and give the guy a break?"

Hermione began spluttering. "How could you? That - That's completely different."

“I fail to see the difference,” Neville commented tersely.

“What happened after the last Yule Ball?” Ron demanded hotly.

“That’s none of your business,” Hermione replied tensely. She was obviously uncomfortable at the shift in conversation.

“Bet it’s got something to do with Vicky,” Ron grumbled loudly. “What, did you snog him or something?”

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

“You did, didn’t you?” Ron continued, rising from his seat. “You bloody well snogged your boyfriend Vicky. I knew it. And all this time you’ve told us he was just a friend, nothing more.”

Hermione turned back to Neville. “How could you? You promised!”

Neville held his hands out and shrugged. “For someone who is such an advocate of openness and honesty, you seem awfully upset about the truth coming out,” he answered back.

Ron, meanwhile, was not finished. “Un-bloody-believable! You really did want to go with Vicky last night. I don’t know why you didn’t just tell me no when I asked you.” And with that, Ron stormed out of the Great Hall without a backwards glance.

“Well I hope you’re happy,” Hermione said as she turned a withering gaze towards Neville.

“Oh would you just grow up already,” Harry unexpectedly input. “If you would just tell Ron the truth about how you really feel about him, you’d save yourself and the rest of us a lot of trouble.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hermione insisted, crossing her arms across her chest.

“Whatever,” Harry said, dismissing her reply. “Either you like Ron or you don’t. But if you do like him, you have to take him flaws and all.

You can't just take the good and forget the bad. I know what you're trying to do, what you're holding out for. You want Ron to grow up and face his feelings, his insecurities and all of that, and confess his feelings to you. But you're unwilling to do the same. Either you like Ron and take him for what he is and tell him so, or stop stringing him along hoping that he'll grow up and change into the man you want him to be."

Hermione's jaw hit the floor, and hers was not the only one. Neville and Ginny both turned incredulous stares to him as well. "What?" he asked them.

Ginny was the first one to shake herself out of her stupor. "Nothing. That was just really insightful Harry."

"Yeah," Neville agreed. "When you put things like that, all the arguing and everything makes so much more sense."

Hermione looked like she was gearing up to argue with him, but she suddenly deflated before them and slumped down in her seat. She dropped her head into her hands and groaned.

"Do you like Ron?" Harry asked her. She nodded into her hands. "Can you accept him for who he is, faults and all?"

Hermione lifted her head. "I don't know," she cried in exasperation. "This would be so much easier if he'd just grow up."

Harry, Ginny, and Neville all shared a look and silently agreed not to comment on that. "Well I think you should figure that out before the two of you drive each other and the rest of us barmy," Ginny exasperatedly told her.

Hermione was contemplative and quiet after that. Neville finished his lunch and excused himself a few minutes later. When Neville started out of the hall, Harry looked at Ginny and cocked his head at Neville mouthing the words, "Be right back." She nodded in understanding and turned back to her meal as Harry rose and followed after Neville.

He caught up with him just outside the entrance hall. "Neville," he called out, halting his friend.

"What's up?" Neville asked as he spun around.

Harry quickly closed the distance between them until they were only a meter apart. "I just wanted to say thanks for sticking up for me back there," he said, waving absently in the direction of the Great Hall.

Neville shrugged. "I heard about your vision," he said quietly. Harry nodded. "I have no idea what you saw, but it was obviously bad. Hermione means well, but she doesn't know when to back off. And she has a nasty habit of trying to make everything her business."

Harry cocked an eyebrow at Neville, surprised at his candidness.

"Last year, after I ran into you all in St. Mungo's, she cornered me and tried to make me talk about my parents," he answered Harry's unasked question. "She wouldn't let the matter drop no matter how much I protested."

"How'd you get her to stop?" Harry asked, curiously.

Neville smirked mischievously. It was a foreign, though not unflattering look for him. "I threatened to tell you and Ron about her and Krum."

Harry could not suppress a hearty guffaw. An image of Neville in his first year popped into his head, and trying to reconcile that boy with the Neville standing in front of him was too absurd. "You'll have to find some new blackmail material now," Harry commented after he had stopped laughing.

"What makes you think I don't already have other material?" Neville asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Harry just shook his head and chuckled lightly. "Remind me not to get on your bad side."

"That I can do," Neville remarked.

"Right, well, I'm going to get back to my lunch. Thanks again, Neville."

"See you later Harry," Neville said with a nod of his head.

Harry returned to the Great Hall and reclaimed his seat next to Ginny. Hermione had disappeared while he was gone. Ginny quirked an eyebrow at him, and he smiled in reply. "When did Neville become so devious and mischievous?" he asked her as he tucked back into his meal.

"When none of us were looking," she answered. "You know Hermione kept that a secret from me too? I can see why she wouldn't tell Ron and even you by a stretch since you were Ron's best friend, but why wouldn't she tell me about it?"

Harry shrugged. "I've never really understood Hermione, and I don't think that's going to change any time soon."

OoOoO

Professor McGonagall stepped onto the staircase and idly waited as it spiraled upwards to bring her to the doors of the Headmaster's office. While he had not informed her of this meeting's topic, she had a feeling she knew at least whom this meeting was to be about. The staircase stopped moving, and she lifted the griffon knocker and was about to wrap lightly when the Headmaster's voice called out to her, "Come in, Minerva."

She dropped the knocker and opened the door, allowing herself a brief smile at her much esteemed colleague. She knew that he rather enjoyed trying to surprise his visitors in that way. After all her years working with him, she was rarely surprised by his antics, yet the man continued to play his games without fail. It was something that both endeared and exasperated the Gryffindor Head of House, depending on the circumstances.

She walked into the room and greeted the man warmly. "Hello, Albus."

"Good evening, Minerva. Sherbet Lemon?" he offered, holding out a tin filled with the tart candies.

"No, thank you," she declined politely. She ignored the squashy armchair in front of the Headmaster's desk and conjured herself a straight-backed wooden chair. She ignored his light chuckle and seated herself, waiting expectantly for him to start the conversation.

"It was quite an interesting evening last night, wouldn't you say?" he inquired conversationally. That was another thing about the Headmaster; he never cut straight to the point.

"It certainly was. Aside from the incident with Mr. Potter, the night went as well or better than expected. The fireworks were a nice touch that we must thank Harry for," she replied, trying to steer the conversation to the topic at hand.

"Ah yes, we most certainly will. Though it would have been nice to have been informed of his plans beforehand, it was certainly a pleasant surprise," Dumbledore replied.

"Indeed," Minerva agreed.

"But then again, Mr. Potter seems to be full of surprises lately," the Headmaster continued.

'And now we get to the heart of matters,' she thought to herself.

"I was quite surprised to find how well he fared on the dance floor last night," he said casually, as though that example were just pulled randomly from the top of his head. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"Oh for Merlin's sake, Albus. You know very well that I taught Harry to dance," she scolded him. Sometimes his games could get on her nerves. She knew that he wanted something from her regarding Harry. She was both anxious and wary of finding out exactly what that could be.

The Headmaster chuckled lightly. "Direct as always," he commented warmly. "Yes, I was able to place you as his dance instructor. If the looks of pride you were sending him during the first dance were not enough, Harry asking you onto the dance floor certainly was." She nodded curtly in reply, hoping he would get to the point sooner rather than later. "And how were your lessons arranged?"

"He asked me after class one day," she replied a bit impatiently. She was tempted to stop there, but she knew the Headmaster would ask for more of the innocuous details. "We met twice a week for a little over a month. Judging by how well he did last night, I'm inclined to think he found some way to continue practicing without me after our lessons had ended."

"You don't say," the Headmaster responded. "Did Harry indicate why he chose you as his dance instructor?"

"He didn't have a lot of other options," Professor McGonagall replied tersely. "He wanted to keep the lessons a secret from Miss Weasley, so she was obviously out of the question. The only other female he is close enough to ask would have been Miss Granger, but I understand the two of them have not been on the best of terms lately. Who else could he have asked? I was surprised when he approached me about it, but when I stopped to think about it, it made a lot of sense. It's something a boy should learn from his mum. Seeing as Harry has a rather poor substitute, I can imagine why nobody ever took the time to teach him." She had never forgiven the man for leaving Harry with the Dursley's. She had adamantly opposed the idea, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Minerva was not normally one to hold a grudge, and she had learned to move on. But she refused to relent in her opinion. "I only hope I was able to do Lily proud."

"I have no doubts that you have," Dumbledore sincerely told her. "She would have been quite proud of her son last night."

"Mmhmm," McGonagall agreed, losing herself in her thoughts of Lily and James.

After a long moment, the Headmaster interrupted her reverie. "How would you say Harry has been doing this term?"

Minerva shook herself out of her thoughts and took a moment to process the question. "Very well. He's been giving Miss Granger a run for her money in my classes. He's always among the first to master every spell, and his scores on his essays and tests have improved dramatically over previous years. All his other teachers have reported the same except for Severus. He insists that the OWL administrators must have been swayed by Harry's fame."

If anything, she thought his full potential was still left untapped. He was not always the first to get a spell right, but he did not appear to struggle like his classmates. In fact the spells seemed to take little to no effort for him to cast. All the motions were right, yet he remained calm and was not frustrated in the face of failure. It was as though he knew he could do it. In the past he never seemed to apply himself. Now it was as though he already had the ability to cast the spells, and it only took him a few tries to perfect it. She resolved to watch him more carefully this term and wondered what he might be capable of.

"So he's been taking his studies much more seriously this year?" Dumbledore asked, interrupting her thoughts and ignoring the comment on his Potions Master.

"It would appear that way," she remarked. "I've noticed he spends quite a bit of time in his office, and from what I've heard he's been spending much of his time reading." She was beginning to wonder if there was any real direction to these questions or if he was just trying to learn as much about Harry as possible. Why would the Headmaster arrange a meeting with no other purpose than to talk about Harry when he was not even in any trouble? Something felt amiss.

The Headmaster nodded thoughtfully. He steepled his hands in front of himself and stared into space over the tips of his fingers. After a moment he turned his gaze back to her. "Could his newfound focus on his studies have something to do with the problems between himself and Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger?"

She considered the possibility for a long minute before responding. "I suppose it is possible but unlikely. If that were the case, he would be

more dejected over it. He's too upbeat for that to be the case. I can tell that he's bothered by what's been going on between the three of them, but from what I can tell he hasn't let it drag him down too much. Besides, he has other friends he's been able to rely on this term. He and Miss Weasley have become close, and I've noticed him spending much more time with Mr. Longbottom than in years past."

"Yes, he and Miss Weasley appeared very close last night," Dumbledore agreed. "And Miss Weasley's fierce protection of Harry last night should be proof enough of her feelings."

Minerva snorted. "She practically threatened us along with Miss Granger. Under any other circumstances she'd be in detention for the next month at least." Truth be told, she was rather proud of the girl. It was not always easy to stand up to your friends and even more difficult to stand up to figures of authority. That she was willing to do both on Harry's behalf showed Minerva quite clearly how she felt about Harry, and she already had an idea how Harry felt about her, though she wondered if he had acknowledged his feelings yet. If not, it was only a matter of time. She smiled at this thought; she remembered James and Lily when they finally got together. If anyone deserved that kind of happiness, it was Harry. Hopefully Miss Weasley would be able to provide it.

"Indeed," the Headmaster said behind his light laughter. "It's a shame Tom managed to ruin their night."

"Is his Occlumency still not strong enough to stop the visions?" she asked curiously. She had thought that Harry's skills with Occlumency were stronger than they had expected.

"I fear Occlumency may not be the answer to their connection," the Headmaster admitted. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "The truth is that Harry is quite a skilled Occlumens, and it was mostly all self taught. But that doesn't seem to have an effect on their link. There has never been a connection like theirs in recorded history. I had hoped Occlumency would help shield Harry from it. Their link seemed similar enough to Legilimency that Occlumency might help, but it appears I was mistaken."

"So what now?" she inquired. "There must be other options available to counteract their link."

He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "I sincerely hope so," he responded wearily. "I've been looking but have not yet found an alternative." He heaved a tired sigh. "So you think Harry is holding up pretty well?"

"Yes," she replied simply. "Given his behaviour and performance in class and all that we talked about during our dance lessons, I'd say he is handling everything remarkably well."

"And what did the two of you talk about in your lessons?" he asked seemingly casually.

Minerva began to grow tired of this interrogation. He was obviously trying to fish for information about Harry, and he did not have the decency to just come out and ask her outright. The fact that she was not even sure what he was looking for did not help her mood in the slightest. "A variety of things: classes, the HA, Sirius, the war. Let me ask you something; why did you push so hard for Harry to be made an Assistant Professor?"

The Headmaster quirked an eyebrow at her questioningly. "I believe I gave my reasons before the start of term."

"Are you telling me there was no other reason you pushed so hard to sell the idea to the staff?" she asked seriously, her eyes drilling into his. When he did not immediately respond, she continued. "It was more for Harry than his classes, wasn't it? You wanted to give him something to keep him busy and occupied."

The Headmaster's eyes pierced into hers for a moment before he responded. "There is some truth to that. Harry has time and again proven himself unwilling to sit on the sidelines while there is trouble. He has a drive to be involved and would be restless sitting cooped up in the castle while a war is being waged outside Hogwarts' walls."

"You were worried he'd find some way to get himself in trouble," she finished for him. His concern was valid. Harry did have a knack for

finding himself in troubling circumstances, though she felt it was usually because the adults in his life failed to take him seriously. Had she taken his worries about the Philosopher's Stone seriously, Harry and his friends never would have gone to save it. This past year, Harry had not been informed of his own situation which is why he was so easily led to the Ministry of Magic. She wondered if perhaps they were repeating their mistakes by continuing to treat Harry like a child.

"Yes," he admitted. "I thought that if I gave Harry the position, he would feel like he was accomplishing something. I had rather hoped he would take the lessons seriously, but even I was not prepared for just how much thought and preparation he put into it. He devised the magical contract on his own, researching, composing, and even casting the spells for it himself. He came prepared with a list of topics he was going to cover in each class. He took complete control of his classes, and I couldn't be prouder with the job he has done."

"I quite agree. You should see the way he teaches and the way the students respond to him," she remarked. "He's a natural."

"How many of his classes have you visited?" he asked.

"Just one of each, though I plan to do more this term. He raised an interesting point with me during our dancing lessons. He was given the title Assistant Professor and classes to teach but was left to his own devices. Nobody was ever set to monitor him or ensure he was handling things appropriately, and we never included him on anything that might be pertinent to his position as a member of the staff." She hesitated, uncertain of sharing this next bit of information, before continuing. "We've arranged to meet monthly this term in an effort to address those issues, and I plan to attend at least one of each of his classes every month as well."

"Hmm, and Harry was the one to raise the issue, you say?" the Headmaster inquired.

"Yes," she replied. "An oversight on our parts, I would say."

"Indeed," he replied. "I trust you will keep me informed on your discussions with Mr. Potter?"

It was phrased as a question, but she knew it was meant more as an order. "I will update you on anything of pertinence," she told him, choosing her words carefully. She would share anything relevant to the school, but she would not share anything that Harry divulged to her of a more private nature. Harry was her charge; he was a student in her House, and she would not betray his trust. If the Headmaster wanted to know more about Harry, he could ask him himself.

"I trust that you will."

OoOoO

Later that evening Harry lay in bed staring up at his canopy as thoughts flowed through his consciousness. It had been a long day but could have gone much worse. There was only one person he had to thank for that, and he was sure that he would never be able to repay her. He had not planned on sharing the contents of the vision with Ginny; he had never intended to share it with anyone. But lying with his head in her lap, he had felt compelled to open up to her. He was surprised at how much it had helped him. What had once seemed to be an insurmountable wall was reduced to just another hurdle in his path.

He could not help thinking, however, it was somehow inappropriate. Was it right for him to smile and act as if nothing was wrong? Was it disrespectful to the victims of the attack to just move on and put the events behind him? Harry pondered those questions as he lay in bed that night. He eventually forced the issue aside for the time being, unable to come to any sort of resolution. He decided he would think more on it another time and finally let himself drift off to sleep.

The next afternoon when Harry let Ginny know that he was heading to the Room of Requirement to train, he was quite surprised by her response. She appeared shy and nervous, two things he had not equated with Ginny for over a year. He watched a resolve wash over her features and wondered just what was going on with her.

"Would you mind if I joined you?" she asked a bit timidly.

Harry was caught off guard by the request, and it took a moment for him to even process what she had asked. When he did not immediately respond, her face fell and she started talking again. "Never mind. I don't know why I asked in the first place. I don't want to slow you down. I'd probably just get in the way anyway."

"Don't be silly," Harry interrupted. "Of course you can come. But - uh - why exactly?"

Ginny smiled in relief. "I was hoping you could show me how to use your training dummies and maybe give me a few pointers."

"You want to start training?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, if you don't mind," she said.

"But what about when classes start up; won't you be too busy?" Harry questioned.

She shrugged. "I don't really care about classes or OWLs at this point. I think the things you could teach me are a lot more important, don't you?"

He had no choice but to nod. It was true. Good OWL scores would be nice, but they wouldn't do her any good when confronted with a Death Eater. "If you're sure...?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Well come on then," he said, offering his hand to her. When she took it, he tugged to help her up out of her seat. He reluctantly let go of her hand once she was standing, and they quickly made their way to the Room of Requirement. Once inside, Harry shut the door and put up wards to guarantee their privacy.

The first thing Harry did was show her how the training dummies work. He demonstrated how to set them up, casting the spells he wanted the dummies to use on him. Then he activated and deactivated the dummies, displaying the different skill levels they could be set at. "If

you ever forget how to do it, just ask the room for the instruction booklet," he concluded.

Ginny nodded. "Right."

"Now, what kind of training were you looking to do exactly?" he asked. "The dummies should be sufficient to help your dueling abilities. I think you should focus the rest of your time building your wandless abilities."

"What about learning more spells?" she inquired.

"That's important as well, but I think developing your wandless magic is much more crucial," he patiently explained. "For one thing, you're not allowed to use your wand outside of Hogwarts. If you want to be able to make any sort of difference now, you'll need to be able to do it without a wand. Otherwise, you'll be waiting for your seventeenth birthday before you can really do anything." She nodded her understanding. "But more importantly, it gives you a weapon the Death Eaters can't take away. Let's say you're fighting with your wand, and you get disarmed; the average witch or wizard would be pretty much helpless. More importantly, the Death Eaters would assume you were completely helpless and might let their guard down. Even if you never manage the control you have with a wand, being able to cast even a weak stunner without a wand could one day save your life."

He paused to let that thought sink in. "That makes sense," Ginny agreed after a moment of silence.

"Well let's get started then," Harry said.

"Wait, aren't you going to go do your training?" Ginny asked in confusion.

"Right now I'm going to help you with your wandless magic," Harry said in a tone that brooked no arguments.

Ginny shook her head fervently. "No. I don't want to get in your way. You go do your thing; I'll practice on my own."

Harry rolled his eyes at her. "Ginny, I think I can spare a bit of time to help you. Besides, I want to help you. After I work with you for a little while, then I'll get some of my own training in. You're not in my way."

She stared straight into his eyes for a long moment before nodding her acceptance. "Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome," he said with a smile. "Have you done any practicing since our Animagus lessons?"

She shook her head sheepishly. "No; I got caught up in school work and didn't have time."

"I figured as much," he said kindly, trying to convey that he was not upset by her admission. "So we'll start where we left off then."

"Right," she replied.

Harry thought about his need of a table and a quill, both of which appeared before them a moment later. "Okay, we'll start small. Levitate the quill and direct it around the room."

Harry watched as her face scrunched up in concentration. She bit down softly on her lip as she extended her hand towards the quill, and Harry found himself unable to tear his gaze away from her bottom lip as it was lightly pinched between her teeth. It was not until she huffed in frustration that his mind caught back up with the present. "Try casting the spell with your wand first. Get a feel for the magic again, and try it again."

She nodded and flicked her wand out of her wrist holster. She cast the spell a couple times before slipping the wand back into the holster. She was able to lift the quill up when she again extended her hand toward it, but it was shaky compared to the control she exerted with her wand. After she had levitated the quill several times, steadily improving her control, he had her levitate the table instead. She struggled with it this time and was only able to get the table a couple inches off the ground before it fell back down with a thud. She tried again to similar results. On her third try, the table only shook and

never actually left the ground. She let out a huff of frustration, and Harry was reminded of when he had first learned the skill.

"Take a minute to calm down," he told her. "Then come back and give it another shot. The more frustrated you become, the harder it will be to control your magic. The table will either never leave the ground, or it'll fly up into the ceiling completely out of control. Your emotions are tied into your magic somehow - I don't know to what extent - and affect your ability to control spells. Our emotions don't affect most spells very much when using a wand for some reason. I think it's because the wand acts as a focus, but I'm not entirely sure."

She nodded her understanding. "When did you first learn?" she asked him after a moment of silence.

"A week or two into summer," he told her honestly.

"How did you find out about it or learn how to do it?" she asked. "I've heard of wizards doing it before, but I thought it took years of training and that only the most powerful wizards could ever manage it."

"I did wandless magic without realizing it the summer before my fifth year, when the Dementors attacked," he explained. "It was nothing big; I dropped my wand after my cousin hit me and was searching for it, but it was too dark to see anything and the Dementors were closing in fast. I didn't even consciously think about it, but I cast lumos and my wand lit right up. I didn't think about that for the longest time, but I was thinking about a lot of things this past summer and realised what I had done. I decided to see what else I could manage and eventually got to the point where I could cast as well without a wand as I can with one."

"Why don't you give the table another shot?" he asked tilting his head towards the offending object.

She nodded her head, took a deep breath, then extended her hand towards the table again. When her face again scrunched in concentration, Harry refused to allow himself to become distracted; instead, he spoke up. "You're trying too hard. You shouldn't have to

put that much effort into calling your magic forth. Don't try to force it around, call it to you. Let it build up, then release it."

She nodded. Her face still scrunched up slightly in concentration, but it was more relaxed than it had been. Harry watched as she took another deep breath and extended her hand. The table lifted several feet into the air and hovered for several seconds before slowly falling back to the floor. "I did it," Ginny exclaimed.

"Of course you did," Harry said. "Now do it again. Get it higher and hold it up for longer. Keep doing it over and over, each time push yourself a little harder and farther, and if you feel yourself start to get frustrated, concentrate on positive thoughts like you would when summoning a Patronus. I'm going to go train with the dummies. If you need me, just yell."

"Thank you," she said with a grateful smile.

"You're quite welcome," he replied. "Have fun!"

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed as he made his way back over to the dummies. He worked for a good forty-five minutes to an hour before heading back over to Ginny. She had progressed from the table to a bed, and Harry was distinctly reminded of his own wandless training. He chuckled as the bed rose off the ground and disillusioned himself so that he could sneak up on her. He crept up to the bed and leapt onto it, canceling the disillusionment charm mid-leap. Ginny let out a squeak and pulled her hand away, causing the bed to crash to the ground, Harry with it. When the bed struck the ground, Harry bounced up and off the bed, landing on his feet in front of Ginny. "Hey, Gin!"

She smacked him on the arm as she scowled at him. "Watch what you're doing! I had it going fine until you screwed me up."

Harry smirked at her. "You'll need to learn to block out distractions, but I suppose that will be a lesson for another time. Come on, I want to see what you can do in a duel."

For forty-five minutes Harry had Ginny alternating between fighting dummies and himself. When dueling her, he refrained from using any wandless magic to make the situation more realistic. She was better than he had expected, but he was clearly the superior duelist and had to take it easy on her to see what she was really capable of. He made note of the time and decided they had better get cleaned up if they wanted to make it to dinner on time. He called a halt to the dummies Ginny was dueling and told her to hit the showers. Two shower rooms appeared for them this time, and they each entered their own respective rooms to wash up before heading down to the Great Hall for dinner.

On Saturday morning, shortly after Harry and Ginny had sat down for breakfast in the nearly deserted Great Hall, two owls arrived at nearly the same instant. One, which Harry recognized and mentally greeted, was bearing a letter for Ginny. The other, unfamiliar to Harry, held its leg out for him to remove the attached letter. He unfurled the roll of parchment and immediately discerned the script of Remus Lupin. Harry glanced over and saw that Ginny was already buried in her own letter, presumably from her parents, so Harry began reading.

Dear Harry,

You're lucky this isn't a Howler. If circumstances had been different, you'd be lucky if that's all I sent you. As it is I believe I owe you my thanks. Or rather, if I don't thank you, I'm liable to be hexed into next year.

Your rather mischievous gift was worthy of your father. It seems you are more than picking up where we left off. Any news on that front? Got a name picked out yet? What about your partner in crime? Don't think I haven't heard about Mr. Malfoy's unfortunate fate, nor figured out the culprits responsible for it.

Oh quit being such a wet blanket. Hiya Harry. I liked the doll. It was cute. And it got the old wolf off his arse to ask me out. Of course, after I saw the doll, I wasn't about to let the matter drop until he admitted why you had sent it. Then I had to convince him that he was more than worthy to be dating me, wolfishness be damned. Can you believe that?

Yes, that's lovely Dora, can I get back to my letter now? Thank you. Much as I think I deserve a little retaliation for your stunt, I'm much too happy right now to care. So you're getting off easy for now. Though you may want to take some of your own advice. And if you don't know what I'm talking about, then we really need to have a nice, long talk. Take my advice and don't wait too long. You never know how much time you might have, and you don't want to waste any of it. Hypocrite! Yes, well I've learned my lesson, and I hope you can learn from my mistakes, rather than making them yourself.

We heard about what happened at the end of the ball. I don't know exactly what you saw, but I can't imagine it was very pleasant. I know it sounds a bit hollow, but try not to let it bring you down. There is nothing you could have done to stop it. Don't let it get in the way of your life. If you do, then you're letting Voldemort win. I'm sorry I can't be there to help you, but if you ever want to talk, I'll make it happen regardless of the time of the month.

Thank you, again, and take care, Harry.

With warm regards,

Remus Lupin and Tonks

P.S. I mean it. Go tell her how you feel. And if you need help finding a good broom cupboard... Who am I kidding? You have the map with you. Put it to good use.

Harry had to fight down a blush at Remus's postscript. He rolled up the parchment and slipped it into a pocket in his robes as he thought over Remus's message. He wondered how the man had pegged his feelings so well. Was he that obvious? At the time he probably could not have placed his own feelings, and knowing that Remus had figured it out in just that short time made Harry worried and just the slightest bit embarrassed. Then there was the advice Remus had given. He would have to think more about it, but now was not the time for that with Ginny sitting right next to him.

He thought of Remus and Tonks, and large smile spread across his lips. His gift had worked better than he had anticipated. He was happy for the two of them and sensed Tonks would be good for Remus. She was fun and would hopefully be able to bring out a more fun-loving side to Remus, the way Harry imagined the man was when the Marauders were in their prime.

Harry looked over to find Ginny absently stroking the owl that had delivered her post, shifting her gaze between the owl and Harry. "You bought my parents an owl for Christmas?" she asked him with an arched brow.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Errol is getting pretty old, and with Death Eaters intercepting post, a reliable owl is a necessity these days. Dievas there will do just fine, won't you?" he said, turning to the owl and stroking its feathers. His hand brushed against Ginny's in the process, causing Harry to turn and smile at her.

"Dievas?" Ginny inquired.

Harry shrugged. "He was already named."

"Oh. Well, that works I guess. He's a beautiful owl," she commented, turning her attention back to the owl.

"I told you you'd like her," Harry mentally said to the owl. The only response he received was a moan as Ginny stroked away at the owl's feathers. Then aloud he said, "I think you've made yourself a friend." Ginny just smiled at him. "So what did your parents have to say?"

"They wanted me to thank you for the owl and insist that you really shouldn't have." Ginny rolled her eyes as she continued, "But we both know that line isn't going to get them anywhere. Honestly they love the owl. Mum sounds quite ecstatic about it."

"I'm glad," Harry replied contentedly. "What did your mum think of the necklace? And how did your dad like the muggle electronics?"

"Mum says she loves the necklace. They were popular when she was much younger, and she had forgotten all about them. She says it's very comforting to have a constant assurance that we're all safe. Dad says she's stopped lugging the clock around," Ginny told him excitedly. "And Dad's thrilled he's got more muggle toys to play with, as always. Thank you, again, for picking out his gifts."

Harry smiled at her enthusiasm. Ginny seemed to get as much enjoyment at giving gifts as she did in receiving them. He found that he quite liked that about her. "You're welcome, Gin."

She smiled back. "So who was yours from?"

Harry grinned impishly. "Remus."

Ginny quirked an eyebrow. "Oh? What did he have to say?" As soon as she finished saying it, her eyes widened as she remembered something. "Did he like his gift?" she asked around a large smile.

"Yeah, not as much as Tonks though." Harry chuckled. "She made him explain why I would send him a metamorphmagus doll."

Ginny burst out into peals of laughter. "Oh, I wish I could have seen that," she said after she had calmed down some.

"Me too," Harry absently replied, his mind wandering to what the scene must have looked like.

"Well?" Ginny interrupted his musings. "What happened?"

"Well I don't know the full story, but the short of it is that Remus and Tonks are now an item," Harry told her smugly.

Ginny's smile widened. "Well aren't you quite the matchmaker," she commented, laughing lightly to herself. "We'll have to get you a bow and some arrows with heart-shaped tips. Oh, and we'll have to get you some wings as well. Our own little Cupid."

Harry nudged her with his arm. "Brat."

She stuck her tongue out at him. Harry mimicked her, then remembered something else Remus had brought up. "We need to pick out names," he told her quietly.

She frowned in confusion, but before she could even open her mouth to ask the question, realisation dawned across her face, her mouth forming the shape of an "oh" and her eyebrows rising.

"Remus asked if we had anything picked out yet," Harry told her.

She nodded. "I hadn't really thought about it since you first brought it up, and don't even think of suggesting that again," she said warningly.

Harry chuckled lightly. "Wouldn't dream of it. I don't fancy finding out what it feels like to have my bogeys grow wings and claw at my face."

Ginny's smile turned a bit wicked. "Too right."

"Keep it in mind and try to come up with suggestions; we'll talk more about it later," he said, his eyes drifting over to Hermione, who had just entered into the hall. Hermione had been very contemplative ever since their conversation on Boxing Day. An unexpected benefit of this was that she was so consumed by her thoughts that she hardly paid Harry any mind, freeing up his time to resume his training. Ron was likewise distracted, making it incredibly easy for he and Ginny to slip away without being accosted.

Ginny's eyes followed his gaze, and she turned back and nodded agreeably. They settled into their meals, greeting Hermione politely when she seated herself across from them. Not long afterwards they were joined by Neville, and finally Ron. The meal was awkward from then on with Ron pointedly ignoring Hermione. For her part, Hermione didn't actively try to engage Ron in conversation, though she at least acknowledged Ron's existence. Harry, Ginny, and Neville kept up a light conversation, and they all made it through the meal intact.

Harry spent most of the rest of the day training or reading, though he did manage to get in a game of chess with Ron after lunch. They talked a little about Quidditch during the game, but when Harry

brought up Hermione, Ron closed up and refused to even discuss their friend. Harry turned down a second game in favor of returning to his books. He had put off looking for a solution to block his link to Voldemort for too long, and it was time he started searching in earnest. It was obvious that Occlumency was ineffective against it, but Harry was at a loss for other options. The problem was that he had no idea how he was even linked with Voldemort. Nobody did. Dumbledore had only suggested Occlumency because the link seemed similar to Legilimency. It was not similar enough, it would appear.

More than once he had asked the Headmaster if he had any other ideas on ways the link could be blocked, and each time he was disappointed. Either Dumbledore had no other ideas, or the man was hiding things from Harry again. Harry wanted to believe it was the former. Dumbledore had no reason to keep secret anything that could help block or maintain the link. He obviously wanted to help Harry contain it since he was giving him Occlumency lessons.

Harry scoured through every book on Legilimency and Occlumency that he could find. He exhausted the library's limited resources on the subject rather quickly. He had already read all the books in his own collection, so he made a quick trip to Diagon Alley to see if he could procure any additional books on the subjects. He found several advanced books that were sure to keep him busy for some time. He was not sure if any of the information in the books would help at all, but he had to try. At the least, the extra knowledge would probably help with Ginny's upcoming lessons. She was still working through her own Occlumency book to learn the basic concept of what the discipline required.

Thursday evening rolled around before he realised it, and Harry was ascending the Headmaster's circular staircase for his weekly Occlumency lesson. He was not particularly looking forward to this lesson. He had not spoken to the Headmaster since he had experienced his vision one week prior, and he feared that the man would want to discuss it. Harry had faced the memory and did not intend to do so again.

Dumbledore called him into his office before Harry could knock, so Harry pushed the door open and strode into the circular room. "Good evening Professor," he greeted. "Hello Fawkes," he added, walking over to the phoenix to stroke his feathers a couple times. Fawkes trilled a greeting, leaning into Harry touch. The sound of phoenix song emboldened Harry and lightened his burden; he gave the phoenix an appreciative smile and an extra stroke through his feathers.

"Good evening to you as well. How are you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry suspected the man meant more than just the standard greeting in his question. "As well as can be expected," he replied as he seated himself in front of the Headmaster's desk.

Dumbledore nodded wearily, staring over his steepled fingers. "Is there anything I should know from your vision?" he asked after a minute of silence.

"I don't think so," Harry replied carefully. "I didn't see anything helpful, just lots of torture and killing. I would've come to you if I had anything useful."

"I assumed as much, but I had to ask," he said. "I will not ask you to relay any part of the memory to me; I went to the scene of the attack later that night, and I daresay asking you to relive what you saw would be beyond cruel. But, if you should find yourself in need of someone to talk to, my door is always open to you," he offered kindly.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied sincerely. And he meant it, both for not asking him to relive the memory and for the generous offer. He didn't plan to ever talk to him about the vision, but it was kind of him to offer. Few people in the world would be able to relate in any way to the horrors he had witnessed. Harry knew the Headmaster was one of them, and it comforted Harry a bit to know that the option was available.

"Now, shall we move on to your lesson?" the Headmaster asked.

Harry nodded confidently. Dumbledore had been unable to break into his mind at all over the last few sessions. It took all of his energy to keep the man out, but Harry was proud of himself for being able to stand up to one of the most powerful wizards in the world. He met the Headmaster's steady gaze and felt the man's presence probing around his mental barriers. He followed the man's progress, reinforcing the area in preparation for a sudden attack. Suddenly, he felt a presence on the other side of his mind; the problem was that the presence in front of him had not left. He felt both stab into his shields at once, and it was all he could do to stop the one attack that the other broke through his shield after only five or ten seconds of pressure.

Harry abandoned his current post to meet and expel the intruder only to find Dumbledore's presence. The Headmaster had been inside his shields longer than anyone else since he had first built them, and the experience troubled Harry. He had thought himself not immune, *per se*, but much more prepared than that. Harry expelled the Headmaster's presence without any struggle. After a moment, Harry shook his head and refocused on the twinkling blue eyes of his instructor.

"How did you do that?" he asked. He had read a vague mention of some master Legilimens being able to split their consciousness to attack in two places at once, but he had never come across any solid information on the technique.

"Attack in two places at once?" the man offered smilingly.

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"It is an advanced technique that few ever master" Dumbledore replied. "It requires you to split your consciousness in two in order to pierce your prey's mind in two places at once."

Harry frowned in thought. "How do I protect myself against it?"

"There are two ways you can go about blocking the attack," the man explained in a kindly tone. "You must first learn to remove the limitations you place on yourself from your experiences in the

physical world." He paused in his explanation to give Harry a chance to digest the idea.

Harry pondered over the cryptic explanation. Limitations from the physical world - what did that mean? What limits was he placing on himself? The answer hit him rather quickly. He was rather used to the notion that he could only exist in one place at any given time. It was physically impossible, with the exception of time travel, to exist in two places at once. But that was a physical limitation. The Headmaster had just proven that it was possible to simultaneously exist in two separate places mentally.

"So I have to learn how to split my consciousness into two separate entities?" Harry asked.

"That is one approach," the Headmaster agreed with a smile. "But that is not the only method. The other requires you not to think of yourself as existing in any form or entity. I imagine it as the way most people perceive the concept of God to be. You exist everywhere all at once and have supreme control over the world. There has only ever been one reported example of an Occlumens managing this feat, and it is unclear whether the information was based on fact or myth. Most are simply unable to completely let go of their self-imposed limitations, myself included. I would encourage you to attempt the second method in the future, but for practical purposes I will ask you to focus on splitting your consciousness between more than one entity for now."

Harry nodded absently, his mind trying to process all he had just been told. The second method intrigued him greatly. The Headmaster's parallel to God particularly drew Harry's attention. It sounded like if he could manage that, he would never again have to worry about having his mind invaded. Splitting his consciousness would help him to stop the two-pronged assault, but what would happen if a third was introduced? He would have to learn to split his consciousness in three instead of two. He would not put it past the Headmaster to have managed just that. "Who managed it?" he asked after a few minutes.

"It is said that Merlin is the only wizard to have ever mastered the technique."

Harry leaned back in his chair. He would love to succeed, but if only Merlin had ever accomplished it, he held little hope for himself. That would not stop him from trying, however, but he would do as the Headmaster asked for now and concentrate on just splitting his consciousness in two. He focused internally and conjured up the image he crafted to represent his mind. He saw all his trunks, carefully locked and warded. He looked around at his barrier which was firmly back in place. Looking down, he found a physical representation of himself, but he knew it was not real. None of it was; it was all symbolic. Harry concentrated on himself and willed a copy of himself into existence. After a minute, he looked up to see his own face peering back at him. He smiled in triumph, and his clone smiled widely back at him.

Harry shook himself back into the present and realised he had just retreated into himself without giving any sort of indication or warning to the Headmaster. "Sorry about that, but I think I've got it now."

Dumbledore just smiled in reply. "Shall we try again?"

Harry nodded. He did not wait for the second presence before mentally conjuring his clone. He followed the Headmaster's presence along, paying no attention to the clone until he felt the second presence appear on the other side of his mind. He sent the other clone over, but the Headmaster struck quickly. While Harry was worried about getting his second self over to block the second presence, he was lax in his defense in front of the first presence, and Dumbledore was able to break through his shields for the second time that day. Harry quickly realized that it was much harder to concentrate on two things at once than he had imagined.

They practiced a couple more times before the lesson ended. Harry was still unable to block both attacks at the same time, but he was getting a little better at controlling both instances of himself at once. The Headmaster assured him that it would just take practice to get it down.

The holidays were almost over, and too soon classes would resume. Harry and Ginny had to devise a schedule that would allow Ginny to continue training with Harry on a nearly daily basis. They also set aside a couple hour-long sessions each week to work on Occlumency. Harry had expressed some concern over Ginny's cramped schedule, but she had waved his concern off. When he pressed her on it, she reaffirmed that OWL scores were inconsequential. She was much more concerned with training so that she could actually help in the war effort. The thought of Ginny involved in the fighting did not sit well with Harry, but he knew better than to say as much. She was a big girl and trying to shield her from the war would only make him a hypocrite. Instead, he resolved to make sure she was properly prepared.

Ginny also continued to work out with Harry in the mornings. It became a game of theirs to start off every morning by suggesting a possible Marauder name for the other person. Ginny had begun that one, and after the second straight morning of outrageous suggestions, Harry decided it was time to join in. After all, he could not let her get away with trying to call him Mid-Knight - because he is her "Knight in midnight armour" - without retaliating. The next morning he countered with Firefly. Every morning they would trade names, sometimes serious, other times ridiculous, but neither was able to find a suitable name. After their customary teasing and stretching, the two would set off at two different paces. Ginny, body not accustomed to the routine, was unable to keep up with Harry. He assured her that he started off in much the same shape. He had full confidence that she would start seeing improvements within a couple weeks.

The night before classes resumed, Harry experienced another vision. It appeared as though Voldemort was choosing to take a more active role in the war, and Harry was gifted with front row seats. The vision had not been as long or as terrible as the first, but it was enough to leave him quite shaken. He awoke biting his lip to keep from screaming. His scar was ablaze with pain, and Harry felt sick to his stomach. He stumbled out of his bed and over to the bathroom where he leaned over the sink for several minutes, breathing heavily as he tried unsuccessfully to wipe the images from his mind.

The only thing for which he was thankful was that he spent all his other nights with Sirius. Thanks to his godfather's presence, Harry was not plagued with nightmares; instead he listened as Sirius regaled him with stories of the Marauders. Only Voldemort's visions were able to tear Harry away from his time with his godfather, though he feared what would happen when his godfather fully passed on. Deciding that was not a direction his thoughts needed to take at the moment, he turned on the tap and splashed some cold water on his face, then headed down to the common room. He did not think he would be able to sleep any more tonight. Instead, he dug a book, *Legilimency: A Guide to Overcoming the Defenses of the Mind*, out of his trunk and sat at one of the tables to read as he passed the time until morning.

He allowed himself to become fully engrossed in the pages of the book and became oblivious to his surroundings. It was easier that way, to let his brain focus so completely on the words. It kept his mind from wandering to less pleasant things. It had the added effect of making him lose track of time. He had no idea how long he had been sitting at the table reading, nor how long Ginny had been trying to gain his attention, but when he turned to her, she looked rather exasperated with him.

"Finally," she cried. "What's wrong with you? I've been trying to get your attention for a couple minutes now."

"Sorry," Harry replied softly as he turned his full attention to her. "I guess I got lost in my book." He indicated the book which was now lying open on the table.

"Harry, are you all right?" Ginny asked in concern. "How long have you been reading down here?"

Harry shrugged. He had absolutely no idea. "I'm okay," he answered ignoring the second question.

"You sure don't look it," Ginny commented skeptically. Then comprehension dawned on her face. "You had another vision, didn't you? Or a nightmare?"

“A vision,” Harry replied in a vacant voice as he temporarily lost himself to the memories. He quickly shook the thoughts out of his head; it would not do to dwell on that memory.

“We can skip this morning if you want,” Ginny suggested. “If you want to talk about it, I’m here for you.”

Harry shook his head adamantly. “Thanks, but I think I need the workout this morning much more than usual. Give me a minute to run upstairs and change, then we can head down.”

Ginny nodded in reply, and Harry quickly ran up to his dorm and changed into his workout clothes. He came back down shortly thereafter, and the two made their way out of the common room and down to the entrance hall. They strode out into the cold morning air. As soon as they reached the bottom of the stone steps, Harry immediately set off in a quick jog without any stretching or preamble.

OoOoO

Ginny watched as Harry set off at a fast pace and sighed tiredly. She went through her usual stretching routine, all the while keeping an eye on Harry’s jogging form. He was maintaining a brutal pace, much faster than his usual, and Ginny had to wonder how he was managing it. She took off at her own slow jog and felt vaguely inferior. Harry had assured her that he started off in much the same shape back in the beginning of the summer, but watching him now, Ginny wondered if she would ever be able to keep up with him. Even on a regular day his pace far outmatched hers.

Today, she marveled at Harry's endurance. He was jogging at a breakneck pace, and his muscles were clearly straining from the effort. Ginny admired the view as he lapped her yet again, and her thoughts drifted back to the Yule Ball: the way she felt being held in his arms, how comfortable it felt to cuddle with him under the night sky, how he had looked deep into her eyes and leaned in to kiss her. But they had never kissed. Harry had been caught up in a vision, much like the previous night. She shook her head at her thoughts.

Now was not the time for that. Despite how desirable Harry looked at the moment, she was worried about him. She wondered how healthy it was for him to push himself so hard, but she knew better than to press the issue with him. She ran her usual circuit, and went through another stretching routine afterwards. Harry finished his lap and jogged up to her as she was just finishing up. He did not say anything. He just stood there, breathing raggedly, waiting for her.

“You should stretch too, Harry,” she commented. “If I remember correctly, you’re the one who stressed the importance of it to me.”

Harry glowered at her slightly, but to his credit listened to her advice, though he did so rather half-heartedly. After a couple minutes, they walked back into the castle together. Harry walked with a long stride and a stiff gait, and Ginny struggled just to keep up with him. They had already made their way to the third floor when Ginny, thinking Harry needed to slow down and lighten up, decided to give Harry a playful little nudge with her shoulder, sending him lightly into the wall.

Harry turned to glare at her, and she winked at him behind her mischievous smirk. He turned his gaze back forward and did his best to ignore her. Not one to be cowed so easily, Ginny gave Harry another playful shove a moment later. Harry narrowed his eyes at her but did not respond. He continued striding forward at his quick pace. Ginny smirked from beside him as she went to shove him again, only this time Harry was prepared for her. He stopped, mid-stride, causing Ginny to cross in front of him. He stuck his left hand out in behind her and gave her a little push to help her momentum carry her into the wall.

She outstretched both arms to catch herself before colliding into the stone wall and turned to glare at Harry. She found him walking along with his gaze held forward, his face expressionless. Or nearly expressionless, at any rate. She could just see the corner of his mouth twitching upwards. She maintained her glare but could not hold back the smile that tugged at her own lips. Harry passed her by, and she fell into step behind him. She had to nearly jog to manage it, but she gained on him until she was almost touching him. She matched his gait and stepped on the backs of his heels.

Harry whirled around after the third time. "Can I help you, Professor Potter?" she inquired innocently when Harry remained quiet.

"You certainly can," Harry replied. "You can stop stepping on my heels."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ginny feigned innocence, batting her eyelashes at him.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Harry said.

"I'm just trying to walk," Ginny insisted with a smirk. "What's the big hold up?"

"If you want to walk, you can walk in front of me then," Harry told her. He looked pointedly at her and waited for her to move.

She smiled sweetly at him and walked around Harry down the hallway. She glanced behind her to see Harry only a step or two back. As she turned her head forward, she heard his footsteps speed up. She had a feeling he was looking to pay her back. Without looking back, she took one more step then stopped, planted her feet, and leaned back, cocking her head to the side to avoid hitting Harry with it. Instead, her shoulder connected with his chest with only minimal force. She didn't want to hurt him.

Harry gave a startled "Oomph," at the contact. "That's it," he said. Ginny felt his arms twist her around so she was facing him. He bent in front of her, stuck an arm around the back of her knees, then hefted her up onto his shoulder. "You asked for it."

Ginny shrieked in surprise as she was slung unceremoniously over Harry's shoulder. "Put me down," she demanded through her laughter.

"I don't think so," Harry smugly replied as he began walking again. "You were obviously having trouble walking. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself, so I thought I'd help out."

“My hero,” Ginny mock swooned. “Now put me down.” She felt rather self-conscious being hoisted up in the air like that. The only consolation was that the halls were still empty. At least nobody was around to see her arse sticking up in the air.

“Nope,” Harry said. “Not gonna happen.”

“Please?” Ginny pleaded. She wondered if her weight was putting a strain on him.

“Nuh-uh.”

“I promise I’ll be a good girl,” Ginny vowed in her most innocent tone of voice.

“Right,” Harry fired back sarcastically. “That’ll be the day.”

“Hey!” Ginny protested, smacking Harry on his arse. She couldn't help but notice how firm it felt. She looked down and admired the feature momentarily.

“Ooh, cheeky little one, aren't you?” Harry teased, earning himself another smack. “Again!”

“You're sick, Potter,” Ginny instead scolded. She was happy he could not see her face because she could feel the heat flooding to it.

Harry came upon a staircase and slowly trudged up. He began breathing heavily as if he were under great strain, causing Ginny to again wonder at her weight. Then she remembered who she was dealing with and smacked him hard on his arse again. Hard.

“Hey, that one hurt,” Harry complained good-naturedly.

“You deserved it,” Ginny retorted.

“Okay, okay,” he admitted, dropping the act. “You really weigh practically nothing at all,” he commented. As if to prove his point, he

sped his pace up and rushed the final stairs and jogged down the seventh floor hallways.

“Harry,” Ginny shrieked, then promptly broke out into peals of laughter. She was still laughing when they came upon the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy marking the entrance to the Room of Requirement. Harry paced back and forth with Ginny still on his shoulder. “Hey! Hero-boy! We’re here; you can put me down now.”

“Yes ma’am,” Harry replied as he dutifully crouched down and bent forward to allow Ginny’s feet to find the ground again.

“That’s more like it,” Ginny said as she straightened up. She moved to open the door that had appeared, but she was stopped when Harry grabbed her arm and tugged her back towards him. As she was spun around to face him, she found herself wrapped in his embrace. She slipped her arms around his waist to return the gesture.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered into her hair.

Ginny did not need him to clarify why he had thanked her. She squeezed him tightly as she replied, “You’re welcome, Harry.”

The two entered their workout room and began their usual morning routines. Ginny was quite pleased to see Harry turn her way with a smile on his face as he lifted himself up in a pull-up. It was a relief to see Harry smiling again and gratifying to know she was the one to put the smile on his face.

OoOoO

Harry peered at himself in the mirror as he ran a comb through his hair. He set the comb down and shook his head slightly to lose the just-combed look his hair held. Smirking at his reflection, he strode out of the room. He sat on a bench and tapped his foot idly as his mind wandered. He was careful to control the direction of his thoughts, not wanting to revisit the horrors of the previous night.

Instead, he let his mind drift onto Ginny, the reason he was sitting on a bench waiting to head down to the Great Hall. Of course, she was also the reason he was doing so with a smile on his face. She had rather effectively turned his mood around, and Harry had no idea how she had managed it. Not that he was complaining.

Then again, Ginny did have a knack for distracting his thoughts lately. He had found himself thinking about her a lot lately and considered the advice Remus had given him. If only his life were that simple. There were many things in his life that she was not privy to, and Remus, well, had he known the prophecy or the training Harry was putting himself through, he probably would not have thought the situation so simple.

Ginny strolled into the room just then. "Ready?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he responded. "Let's head down." Harry stood and took a step towards the door. He stopped when he realized that Ginny was not following his lead. He turned back towards her and cocked an eyebrow.

"What? You mean I have to walk down?" she asked incredulously. "Some hero you are."

"I can carry you if you want," Harry threatened, taking a step towards her.

"That's okay," she quickly responded. "I wouldn't want you to put yourself out."

Harry snorted. "Right." He held his arm out to her, and she strolled up to him and hooked her arm through his. The two walked together out of the room and down the halls to the Great Hall. They walked casually across the hall to the Gryffindor table and took seats next to each other near the middle of the long table. The room was just starting to fill with students, so it was still only sparsely populated. The two began piling food onto their respective plates and dug into their breakfasts enthusiastically.

When they were halfway through their meals, Ron, Hermione, and Neville joined them at the table. "Good morning all," Harry greeted the lot.

"What's got you so chipper?" Ron sullenly asked as he sank onto the bench across from him.

Harry looked over at Ginny and gave her a small smile which she returned. "Nothing," Harry replied, turning back to Ron. "Just had a good workout this morning."

Ron ignored him and promptly dug into the food. Hermione looked at him quizzically for a moment as if trying to figure something out. She then methodically filled her plate and began eating her breakfast. The meal went on as it normally would with Ron complaining about classes starting up again until the morning post arrived.

When Hermione paid the owl delivering her Daily Prophet a Knut and began to unfurl the newspaper, Harry's posture stiffened, and he stared stonily ahead. He heard Hermione gasp as her eyes took in the headlines on the cover. Harry did not need to read the heading to discern the article's contents. He felt a soft squeeze on his left hand and looked over at Ginny, who was watching him in concern. He offered her a sad smile in reply, and she gave his hand another squeeze as Hermione flipped through the pages of the paper and began reading aloud.

Ginny held onto Harry's hand as Hermione unknowingly and obviously forced him to relive the terrible vision he had experienced only hours prior. He felt her thumb drawing circles over the knuckle of his own thumb and concentrated on the feeling as he tried to drown out the sound of Hermione's voice. The time passed by with Harry barely taking in a word that was said around him. Soon enough Ginny poked him in the side to break him out of his reverie as Hermione was trying to get his attention.

"Come on Harry, or we'll be late for Transfiguration." Harry nodded to her and turned his head back to Ginny. "Thank you," he mouthed to her, giving her hand a squeeze as he stood up from the bench.

She smiled warmly at him in response, also rising from her seat. "You have what, Double Potions now?" he asked rhetorically. He made a face. "Good luck with that."

"Thanks, Harry," she replied. The emotion in her voice was best described as a mix between gratefulness for his sympathy and dismay at her awaiting fate. He gave her a playful nudge as they walked towards the double doors leading into the entrance hall. She turned to look at him and broke out in a fit of giggles at the irony of the situation. "Thanks, Harry," she repeated in a lively voice.

Harry smiled widely at her as they parted ways. He was happy and proud that he had been able to return the favour to her. Transfiguration class came and went. Hermione headed off to Arithmancy, and Harry begged off returning to the common room with Ron and Neville preferring to retire to his office and continue reading on Legilimency.

Harry ate lunch with Ginny and her friends before heading out onto the grounds with Ron for their Care of Magical Creatures class. They spent the class reviewing what they had done the previous term, but Hagrid mentioned that he had a "real treat" in store for them this term. Harry shared a worried glance with Ron as they both wondered what monstrosity Hagrid would bring in this time.

After class ended, Ron ascended to the North Tower for Divination while Harry retreated to the Room of Requirement. He had the room to himself for about two hours before he would be joined by Ginny. They would be focusing on wandless casting again today. She was not catching on as quickly as he had but was making definite progress; then again, when he was first learning, he had nothing to do but practice all day long.

The next morning, Harry had his first DADA and Potions lessons of the new term. The former went well, though it was a bit of a bore. Harry was not looking forward to Potions or, more specifically, class with Snape. As he was leaving the Defense classroom, Ron and Neville both bade him goodbye. Neville also said goodbye to Hermione, but Ron still was not feeling very charitable towards

Hermione. He no longer completely ignored her, but he still tried to avoid talking to her when he could manage it. Harry was mildly surprised they had not argued more about it; he guessed it was due to a change in Hermione. She did not seem eager to make up with Ron, though Harry suspected it had more to do with her confusion.

He and Hermione were among the first to enter the classroom. As the start of class drew near, Draco Malfoy walked through the door, parchment in hand. Not having studied the map lately, Harry idly wondered if the charm he had put on the doorway was still in effect. He and Ginny had refrained from adding new pranks since the end of last term. While neither brought the subject up, Harry felt that it was best to slow things down before Malfoy got too angry, frustrated, and desperate. Desperate was dangerous. Harry expected him to follow the path of his father, but, even so, he did not care to be responsible for helping push Malfoy down that road.

As Malfoy sat at his desk and unfurled the parchment, Harry discovered that the charm was still in effect. He schooled his features as Malfoy strode up to Snape's desk, waving the parchment in front of the man's face. Snape's eyes narrowed, and he turned his head and locked his gaze on Harry. "Mr. Potter. Come here and give me your wand."

Harry turned to Hermione and found her staring at him with a calculating look on her face. She also looked a bit worried as if she thought he was about to be caught at some yet to be determined rule breaking. Harry shrugged at her, stood from his desk, and strode to the front of the room. He flicked his wand out of its holster and presented it to the man. "May I ask what this is about?"

"You will address me with the proper respect in my classroom," Snape sneered at him.

"Fine," Harry gritted out. "May I ask what this is about, sir?"

"Some individual has decided to play a prank on Mr. Malfoy," Snape spat out. "I checked his essay this morning to ensure that he completed it, and he has just shown me that his essay was erased, confirming my suspicion that someone must have erased it and his

last essay. You always thought you were above the rules, but I'll have you expelled for sabotaging another student's hard work."

Harry had to hold back a snort of laughter. Expulsion for sabotaging another student's work? If that were the punishment, Slytherin would be a pretty small house, and Snape would not have a job at Hogwarts. Despite the hand he played in the prank, Harry was unconcerned. It could not be linked to him, especially not through his wand since the spells had all been cast wandlessly. Snape would find nothing to incriminate him. Harry doubted that would stop the man from trying to punish him, but he was prepared to fight him on it.

"Prior Incantato," Snape spoke, jabbing his wand at Harry's which was held in the man's left hand. All that showed in the wand were a couple basic hexes used in a duel at the end of DADA class. Snape scowled at the wand then shifted his gaze to Harry, and his scowl turned to a sneer. Undeterred, the man turned to Malfoy. "Where were you when the parchment was erased?"

"I checked it out in the hall before coming into class," Malfoy explained. "When I checked again at my desk, all the ink had disappeared."

Snape nodded and headed to Malfoy's desk. Harry stayed standing at the front of the room. Snape still held his wand in his left hand. The man waved his wand over Malfoy's desk, then frowned. He shook his head slightly then walked to the door. He waved his wand again, and this time a malevolent smirk spread across his face. He excitedly waved his wand over the doorway, then jabbed it at Harry's wand. His face fell, but in a flash an angry scowl spread across his features. He walked purposefully back to the front of the room and waved his wand over the blackboard. "Instructions for today's potion; there is no need for any of you to talk. Mr. Malfoy, return to your desk. Mr. Potter, follow me."

Why was he not surprised? Snape was clearly dragging Harry to the Headmaster's office, trying to enforce his threat regardless of the fact that he was unable to link Harry to the prank. As Snape stormed out of the classroom, Harry followed in his wake. Where Snape's gait spoke of his anger and frustration, Harry's was perfectly calm. For a

man who was supposedly such a skilled Occlumens, Snape had a lot of issues with controlling his emotions which practically poured off of him.

When they arrived at the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmaster's office, Snape spat the password, and Harry suppressed a snort of laughter. Harry didn't know the words "Jelly Bellies" could be spoken with such malice. Snape stomped up the stairs, unmindful of whether Harry was following or not. Harry stepped onto the stone stairs and allowed them to carry him up to the Headmaster's door. By the time Harry made it to the top, Snape had already barged inside and was pacing back and forth as he lambasted Harry's character. "...for the last time! The boy flouts the rules at every turn. He's even worse than his father and his mangy mutt of a godfather."

It took all Harry's self control not to hex the man right there, consequences be damned. If Snape had not confiscated his wand, he may have. Instead, he stepped into the room in two powerful strides and interrupted Snape's tirade. "I would be careful about what I say, if I were you."

Snape spun around on his heel, a manic gleam in his eye. His wand rose to point at Harry. "Oh really? And why is that?"

"You may live to regret your words; then again, you may not," Harry said calmly, meeting the man's gaze.

Harry could see Snape's knuckles whitening as they tightened around his wand. "Are you threatening me?"

Harry arched an eyebrow. "How could I threaten you? I don't even have a wand. It seems to me that you're the one with a wand pointed at me, ready to attack. Very threatening, I assure you," he stated conversationally.

Snape's face flushed, and he swept his right arm as if he was going to cast a spell.

"Enough!" Dumbledore's authoritative voice rang through the room.

Snape's arm fell to his side, but he continued staring maliciously at Harry. Harry turned his body towards the Headmaster, turning his back to Snape as he greeted the man. "Good morning, Professor Dumbledore."

"Good morning, Harry," the Professor greeted in return. "Perhaps you'd like to tell me what you are doing in my office at this time?"

"I'll do my best," Harry replied. "I was in Potions class setting up my workstation when Draco Malfoy walked into the room. After going to his desk, he went to the front of the room and started saying something about his parchment being erased. I'm not sure exactly what was said as I only caught snippets of their conversation." Harry could hear Snape pacing behind him, but he paid the man no mind and continued on with his story. "Sn -- Professor Snape called me to the front of the room and asked for my wand -- which he has yet to give back to me -- and cast Prior Incantato on it. He did not receive the results he had been hoping for. He asked Draco where he was when his parchment was erased, and Draco was not sure but thought it happened somewhere between the door and his desk."

Snape began muttering behind him, but Harry did his best to tune him out. He was sure the man was cursing his name, as well as his dad's and Sirius's, so there was no point in listening to him. "Professor Snape then walked over to Draco's desk and waved his wand over it a few times. I presume he was looking for any lingering traces of the magic. I don't think he found anything at the desk, so he strode to the door next. It looked like he found something there, though I can't be sure what he found. He tried another spell, one I'm unfamiliar with. It involved waving his wand over the doorway, then jabbing it at my wand. I don't think that gave him the results he was looking for either."

"That's because he's found some way to mask his magical signature," Snape shouted menacingly. "The boy is a troublemaker. He's ruined another student's work twice now and is interfering with Mr. Malfoy's ability to learn. I want him expelled immediately."

Harry did not even turn to acknowledge Snape's presence. He kept his gaze locked on the Headmaster, interested in how the man was going to handle the situation.

Dumbledore peered wearily over his half-moon spectacles at his Potions Master. Harry could feel no pity for the man over the situation despite the fact that he had in fact brought the situation about by pranking Malfoy. As far as he was concerned, Snape deserved anything and everything he got, and the Headmaster deserved to have to put up with Snape's crap. After all, he was the one to give Snape the job, no matter how unqualified Snape was to teach. And besides, he seemed to have little problem leaving Harry to deal with Snape's unjustified hatred of him on a daily basis. No, Harry felt no pity for the man at all.

"Harry," the Headmaster turned his head to address him. "Am I correct in stating that you have a free period before lunch?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, slightly surprised that Dumbledore had his schedule memorized. He wondered just how much attention did Dumbledore pay to him?

"Very well. Severus, return to your classroom. Harry and I shall be down at the end of class to investigate the matter," the Headmaster's tone was calm but brooked no room for disagreement.

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape ground out. He spun on his heel and had just reached it when Harry spoke up.

"My wand, sir," he said, holding his hand out.

Snape froze with his hand on the doorknob. He remained that way for several seconds before placing Harry's wand on a nearby table and storming out of the office. Harry calmly walked over to the table, picked up his wand, and slid it back into his holster. "Am I free to go, or do you want me to remain with you until class is over?" he asked, turning around to address the Headmaster. He kept his tone neutral, as though it did not matter to him either way.

The Headmaster sighed. "I think for appearances sake it would be best if you remained here. There is only," Dumbledore pulled a pocket watch out of his robes, "half an hour remaining in the current period."

Harry nodded and strode back into the room. He noticed Fawkes sitting on his perch gazing at him and walked over to the bird. He held his hand out for Fawkes to nuzzle before running his fingers through Fawkes's feathers. As he continued affectionately petting the Phoenix, Harry turned to the Headmaster. "How did you find Fawkes, sir? If you don't mind my asking."

"It was not I who found Fawkes," he replied after a moment's pause. He became withdrawn for a moment, as if caught in a memory. Harry could not tell by his expression whether it was a good one or not. "It was Fawkes who found me. Or saved me, rather."

"Saved you?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"Indeed. Fawkes is the only reason I am alive today," he soberly told Harry. There was no twinkle in the man's eyes. In fact, Harry thought, for just a moment, they looked haunted. "How much do you know about the great war in the 1940's with Grindelwald?"

"Err -- I know you defeated him," Harry said lamely, realising that was in fact all he knew on the subject.

"It was a very dark time," Dumbledore explained. "The main difference between Grindelwald and Voldemort is that Grindelwald declared open war and fought on a battleground. Tom prefers a more subtle war. He attacks in the dead of night against defenseless victims. Tom spreads terror, and that is why so many fear just his name. But make no mistake, Grindelwald was every bit as powerful, and many good wizards and witches perished in the great war."

Harry was unsure what to make of the story, nor the Headmaster's tone of voice, yet he couldn't help finding himself listening with rapt attention as the man continued.

"Grindelwald and I dueled on more than one occasion during the course of the war, and we were evenly matched. The difference between the two of us was that he was the only leader of his forces. I was more of an honorary leader at best. Grindelwald's army would have fallen apart without his leadership. My loss would have been felt by our army, but there were other leaders in place. I knew that if I had an opportunity to remove Grindelwald, I had to take it, no matter what the cost."

The Headmaster rose and strode over to his beloved phoenix. His eyes were twinkling, but it was not the twinkle that Harry was accustomed to. He realised that the Headmaster had tears in his eyes. He took half a step back and watched as Dumbledore held his arm out to Fawkes, who leaned into the man's touch and trilled a heartfelt note. The phoenix rose from its perch and alighted on Dumbledore's shoulder, crooning softly and peacefully.

"We met on the battlefield again, and my opportunity presented itself. He was off-balance, and when he began to cast the killing curse, I had a choice: I could have dove for cover, or I could eliminate the enemy, sacrificing myself in the process. I chose the latter."

Fawkes trilled a sad note and rubbed his head affectionately against Dumbledore's cheek. "It was the first time and last time I ever cast an Unforgivable," he said after a minute of silence. "My only comfort at the time was that I knew my sacrifice would not have been in vain." Harry was not sure whether he was referring to sacrificing his life or his principles in using the curse. He had a feeling it was both. "Just as the green light was about to strike me, a burst of flames erupted in front of me, and Fawkes intercepted the curse."

He walked back behind his desk and slowly lowered himself back into his seat. Harry seated himself in the armchair before in front of his desk. "The battle was still being waged around me, but I was oblivious to it. I looked down and saw a naked, baby bird emerging from the ashes at my feet. I bent down and scooped him up, holding him against my robes. I walked over to Grindelwald's fallen form and knelt next to his body." The Headmaster paused in his story yet again, and Harry felt frozen in place, watching the tired, old man battle his inner demons even fifty years later.

Dumbledore shook himself out of his reverie. "I left the battlefield shortly thereafter, taking Fawkes with me. I took care of him until he grew back to his adult size; it was the least I could do to repay him. I expected Fawkes would leave as soon as he was able, but he never did. He helped guide me through the aftermath of the war, and he's been a constant source of comfort and guidance ever since," he said affectionately, reaching up to scratch just underneath Fawkes's beak, earning him a short burst of song.

Harry found himself curious at the last statement. Comfort he understood; phoenix song always soothed his worries and left him feeling better, content. Guidance, on the other hand, he was not so clear on. "Guidance, sir?"

"That's right, Harry," the Headmaster replied, turning his gaze back to him.

"Can you communicate with Fawkes then?" he asked.

"It is not as simple as that, I'm afraid," Dumbledore explained. "I believe Fawkes can understand everything we are saying." As if to confirm this, the phoenix trilled a short note. There were no words in his song, but Harry got the impression that Fawkes was signaling his agreement. "I think Fawkes just answered your question better than I could ever explain it." Harry quirked a quizzical eyebrow at the man. "Did you not feel it?"

Harry paused half a moment before answering. "I felt -- it felt like Fawkes was agreeing with you, but I don't know why exactly."

Dumbledore's beard twitched as a smile spread across his face. "Yes, I remember it was quite an odd experience at first. As far as I know, Fawkes has no way of actually speaking to humans, but he has his own method of communication, as you just witnessed. When I have a difficult decision before me, I will often turn to Fawkes for advice, to make sure I am making the right decision. I could not ask for a better confidante or advisor; I only wish that I listened to him more often."

"Sir?" Harry asked. He felt like he was prying, but then again, the Headmaster probably would not have brought it up if he did not want him to know.

"Fawkes has been disappointed a lot over the past year and a half," Dumbledore explained cryptically. "At the time, I told myself that Fawkes was only upset at the turn the war was taking, but even then it sounded a little hollow. I believe that Fawkes disagreed with many of my actions last year, and I should have listened to him."

Harry wondered at the source of Fawkes's disagreement. He suspected he might have a pretty good idea, but why the Headmaster was bringing this up again now? "And what does he say now?" Harry asked him. He found himself waiting with baited breath for the answer.

The Headmaster sighed tiredly. "I am headed back in the right direction, but there is still a long road ahead of me," he admitted wearily.

As Fawkes rubbed his beak across Dumbledore's cheek, Harry looked down at his hands in his lap. Never before that moment had he felt guilty over deceiving the Headmaster or his friends. He wondered what Fawkes would have to say to him if given the chance. Harry looked back up to meet the man's gaze. "I'm sure he understands that it's not easy to change and that he's glad you're trying."

Dumbledore smiled a little more brightly, some of the twinkle returning to his eyes. "I don't doubt that he is." He pulled his pocket watch out of his robes again. "I think we best head down to the Potions classroom; class should be ending soon."

Harry nodded in reply and rose from his seat. As Dumbledore did the same, Fawkes flew back to his perch. The two wizards left the room in silence. Harry had a lot to think about after that last conversation, and the Headmaster seemed content to give Harry the time to process things. Harry turned the Headmaster's story over in his mind as they walked through the halls. The experience obviously still haunted him; Harry wondered with how many people Dumbledore had shared that story. He somehow doubted very many people knew

the full story behind how Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald, and he felt privileged to be one of them.

But he knew there was a reason Dumbledore decided to share the story with him. He was obviously trying to show where he was coming from in trying to shield Harry from his fate, but he thought it was more than just that. Was the Headmaster trying to prepare him for his role in the war? To prepare him for how it would feel to be responsible for taking a life? The thought made Harry shiver. There was no doubt in Harry's mind that Voldemort needed to be killed, for good this time, but he preferred not to think too much on it. He would do what was needed and worry about any repercussions afterwards.

They arrived outside the Potions classroom just as the students began filing out. Harry nodded his greetings to all but a couple of the Slytherins and gave a half-smile and shrug to Hermione's inquisitive glance. By the look on her face, she assumed he was in pretty serious trouble. They waited until the room was empty of all students before entering. Snape was standing impatiently in front of his desk with a malevolent glare fixed in place. Harry kept his expression neutral as he walked into the room.

"Ah, Severus, how was the rest of your class?" Dumbledore asked in his usual manner.

"Fine," Snape spat impatiently. "Can we get on with this?"

"Certainly, certainly," Dumbledore absently replied. "I imagine you have classes to prepare for. Now, you said the spell was on the doorway?"

"Yes," Snape responded icily. "Potter put it on the door to erase Draco's parchment whenever he walked through it."

The Headmaster ignored Snape's comment as he turned to the doorway. He swept his wand in a high arc, his brow furrowing in thought. He remained that way, with his wand still held out at the ending point of the arc, for a full minute before he turned around to face them. "A brilliant charm. It is, as you said, keyed directly to Mr. Malfoy, only it is set to clear ink off any parchment he is touching with

his skin. Anything stored in his robes or bag would not be affected. Rather ingenious." Harry had to fight down the proud smile that tugged at the corner of his lips.

"Yes, well, clever as I'm sure he is," Snape said, voice dripping with sarcasm, "Mr. Potter sabotaged one of my student's works on at least two occasions. I want him expelled."

"That has yet to be seen," Dumbledore calmly replied. "Harry, your wand please," he said, holding out his hand.

Harry flicked his wrist and caught the wand in his hand. He tossed it lightly in the air and caught it at the tip, handing the handle to the Headmaster.

"Thank you," the Headmaster said. He turned back around and made another wave over the archway, followed by a jab at Harry's wand, mimicking Snape's earlier action. He paused a moment as he studied the tip of Harry's wand, then switched Harry's wand to his right hand. He drew a complicated pattern over the doorway and paused to study something Harry could not see. After a moment he shook his head. "The spells were not cast with this wand, though you may very well be correct that a signature masking charm was used here. Without the wand that cast the spell, I'm afraid I will not be able to determine the culprit."

Snape's face fell. "What?" he demanded, his face again flushed with anger. "Do you mean to tell me that my student has lost several days worth of work, and Potter is going unpunished for it?" He took two steps toward Harry and whipped his wand out. "If you won't punish him, I will!"

Dumbledore moved to intercept the Potions Master before a curse could be uttered, but it proved unnecessary. As Snape stuck the wand in his face, Harry sprang into action. He ducked his body as he stepped forward, bringing his heel down hard on Snape's toes. He pushed upwards, hand darting out and snatching the wand out of the man's hand as he howled in pain. Harry ducked and took several steps back, pointing Snape's own wand at him poised to attack if necessary.

Snape cursed with a wide ranging vocabulary as rage overtook him. He let his wounded foot fall to the ground and stared into Harry's eyes. "How dare you? Attacking a teacher, you'll be expelled for sure this time, you spoiled, attention-seeking..."

"That is enough!" Dumbledore bellowed, silencing Snape's tirade. Snape turned to the Headmaster and, noticing the look of anger and disappointment in the man's eyes, smirked smugly. Dumbledore shook his head and turned to Harry, taking a step towards him. He held his hand out for Snape's wand. Harry met the Headmaster's kindly blue eyes and nodded, handing the wand over. "Thank you," he responded, handing Harry's own wand back to him. "You are free to go, Harry."

Harry nodded. He turned to give Snape one last look to find the man spluttering, at a complete loss for words. Harry turned back to the door and calmly walked through it. Just before the door shut, he could hear a clearly displeased Dumbledore rounding on Snape. Harry smiled widely; maybe Dumbledore really was trying, but he still had a long way to go.

OoOoO

The next two days were much less eventful for Harry. He was forced to relate his fate to his friends at lunchtime on Tuesday. He and Ginny shared a secretive smile as he told them all that the Headmaster confirmed that he had not cast the spell. Harry left out the conversation he had had with Dumbledore in his office and the confrontation with Snape after class. The first was not his secret to tell, and he guessed that the second was not something the Headmaster would want him spreading around, though he planned to tell Ginny as soon as he could get her alone. Since she was his partner in crime, she had every right to know the added bonus to the prank.

He didn't get a chance to do so until the following morning during their workout. They shared a good laugh over Snape's inability to control his temper. Harry had Potions again that afternoon, a double

session. Snape resolutely ignored him, which suited Harry just fine; it sure beat his usual treatment in Potions class.

The next morning Ginny confided that she had finished the Occlumency book he had given her and was going to begin organizing her mind that evening. Harry was both proud of and nervous for her. It had been a tough and grueling process for him to go through, and he wished there was some way he could spare her the trouble. Instead, he told her the following: "I just want you to know that I'm here for you if you need me. You don't have to share anything with me, though you're certainly free to, but if you just want me to sit with you while you're sorting memories, I'd be more than happy to help."

Ginny smiled in reply and told Harry she might just take him up on the offer. Harry sincerely hoped that she did, though he had difficulty placing exactly why it was. His logical reply was that he knew how hard the process would be and did not want her to go through it alone, but another, increasingly vocal side of him insisted that it was because he wanted to be the one she turned to when she needed someone to trust and confide in. Harry could not deny the validity of either argument, though the latter provided some additional food for thought.

He was not so naive to miss what was happening to him. Ginny was very important to him, and he cared for her greatly -- more than anyone else in his life. He also realised that he cared for Ginny in a different way than any of his other friends. Then again, he would not say it was all that similar to how he used to feel for Cho or even Jessica. It was more a combination of the two. Ginny was his best friend, but she was also so much more than that.

The Yule Ball had been a major wake-up call for him. He had not grasped the true extent of his feelings for Ginny until that night when it had hit him upside the head - repeatedly. When sorting his memories the following morning, he had largely glossed over the rest of the evening because his mind had been so focused on the vision. He had revisited his memories of the ball since then - more than once - and was able to take a good look at himself and several good looks at Ginny.

He recognized the fact that he had been rather caught up in Ginny the entire evening. He would have to be blind to miss the fact that he was incredibly attracted to her; then again, he would have to be blind not to be attracted to her in the first place. The question was not how he felt about Ginny. Simply thinking about her made the answer painfully obvious. No, the question was what to do about it.

He knew what he wanted to do about it. He wanted to finish what Voldemort interrupted on the night of the ball. And if he was not mistaken, and he fervently hoped that he was not, Ginny wanted the same thing. While examining his memory, he was not merely admiring the way Ginny looked in her dress robes which, incidentally, was a constant and rather enjoyable distraction; rather, he had been attempting to discern her feelings. When he successfully maintained his focus, Harry found several signs that Ginny felt the same way.

Her small sighs of pleasure that he had brushed off as figments of his imagination gave him pause. Had he imagined them? Reassessing his memory, he was no longer convinced that her quiet exhales had been wishful thinking, especially if her emotions mirrored his own at the time. There was something to be said about holding Ginny so close in his arms, but Harry could not verbalize it. The sensation of the bare skin of her back against his hands shot a tingle down his spine. The touch of her arms wrapped around his neck made him feel warm inside. When he looked at his dances with Hannah, Hermione, and Minerva, the difference astonished him. He was surprised he had not been outwardly sighing in pleasure upon returning to Ginny's embrace.

Her smile was another indicator. Harry could not believe he had not noticed it before, but she smiled differently for him. He watched her during the meal as she talked and laughed with their friends. She was smiling nearly the whole time, but when she turned to look at him, her smile became brighter, and the cutest little dimple formed on her right cheek. That dimple had distracted him on more than one occasion. He saw the same thing throughout the evening; her smile was brighter when it was aimed at him.

What really gave her away, though, were her eyes. Harry tried to find the words to express what he saw in her eyes but failed spectacularly. When her beautiful brown eyes were directed at him, they seemed to shine with emotion. They were warm, inviting, and deep. Harry lost himself in her eyes more times than he cared to admit. He also caught her surreptitiously checking him out a few times which left Harry quite smug.

Despite these encouraging signs, some doubt still lingered in his mind. Then he came to the end of the evening when they cuddled up together to watch the fireworks. He found himself reveling in the feeling of having her pressed up against him, but he had to shake himself out of it to concentrate. Ginny seemed to enjoy the contact as well. Indeed, from the start of the fireworks to the end, she had burrowed closer to Harry a few times. Then the fireworks finished, and Harry found himself leaning in to kiss her. What mattered most was seeing that Ginny had closed her eyes and leaned toward him, lips parted slightly. She had wanted the kiss.

It should have been an easy decision for him, he realised, but it wasn't. Despite the rather vocal part of him that was urging him to get off his arse and kiss her, another part held him back. What would happen if things did not work out? What if he had misread the situation, and Ginny did not feel the same way? What if she had just been caught up in the magic of the evening? Or what if she did feel the same, but their relationship did not work out?

Harry understood his relationship track record was pretty abysmal. The only person he had properly dated even for a short period of time was Cho, and that had been disastrous. He had been so sure it was what he wanted, that she was what he wanted. But when they actually went out, they had nothing to talk about, no common ground, and things had quickly gone from bad to worse. His situation with Ginny was quite different from the one with Cho, he speculated. He knew that he and Ginny had a lot in common, but there was still the possibility that the relationship would fail. Could their friendship survive?

Harry relied heavily on Ginny. She was his best friend and only confidante. If things went sour and he lost her in his life... Harry did

not want to think about it. Ron and Hermione were still his friends, but there was so much distance between them at the moment. He was becoming much better friends with Neville, but he doubted anyone would be able to fill the void that would be left by Ginny's absence. Then there were all his secrets and her training to consider. Would they be able to keep working together? He did not fear Ginny revealing his secrets, but he depended on her. He enjoyed that he could share things with her that he had never intimated to anyone else. He dreaded losing that.

He wanted more from his relationship with Ginny, but he was terrified of losing what they already had. Was it worth the risk?

A/N: Thus ends the chapter. For news, discussion, update notices, and the Teaserette Guessing Game visit my group site. You can find the link for it on my bio page.

Chapter 17: Playing With Fire

“Of course it’s bloody-well worth the risk, you dolt!” Sirius shouted. He paced back and forth for a moment before calming himself and turning to face his godson. “Harry, I’m serious.”

A wicked grin lit up Harry’s face, and he held his hand out to his godfather. “Sirius, I’m Harry,” he said, as if introducing himself for the first time.

He was surprised when Sirius batted his hand away and pulled him in for a rough embrace. “You really are your father’s son,” he whispered into Harry’s ear. “He used to make that same stupid joke all the time.” Sirius released Harry from the hug but caught him by the shoulders to force Harry to look him straight in the eyes. “You want to know the difference between you and your dad?” He did not give Harry a chance to respond. “James had the courage to ask Lily out. He wasn’t too much of a coward to put himself out there and take the risk.”

Harry felt like he had just taken a blow to the stomach. Was he being cowardly? And what would his father say? Sirius was not done yet, however. He began pacing again as he ranted, “And when Lily turned him down, he had the stones to keep asking. He pursued her relentlessly, and when Lily told James he needed to grow up if he ever wanted a chance with her, that’s exactly what he did. Your father knew Lily was the one for him, and he wasn’t about to let anything or anyone get in his way. I used to think he was barmy. That was until Lily finally gave in and the two of them got together. That was when I realised that James was the smartest of us all.”

Sirius stopped his pacing and turned to fully face Harry. When he spoke again, his voice was soft yet passionate. “I never saw James so happy as when he was with Lily, and we had some really great times together before that. I thought your dad was crazy for pursuing Lily so much. I didn’t think life could get any better than what we had. I was wrong. If there’s one thing you should learn from your father, let it be this: Love is and always will be worth the risk.”

“Yes, and if I knew it was love this would be a whole lot easier,” Harry groaned in frustration. “I mean, I like Ginny; I fancy her. I enjoy spending time with her, and I’m attracted to her. But does that mean I love her?”

“You’ll never know that until you give it a chance,” Sirius replied evenly. “Your father was sure that Lily was the one for him. How he was so certain, I will never know, but he would never have forgiven himself if he didn’t at least take the chance. I don’t know if Ginny is really the one for you, but don’t let your chance pass you by. You may regret it for the rest of your life.”

OoOoO

Harry awoke Friday morning with Sirius’s words ringing in his head. As he got dressed for his morning workout, he replayed the conversation over and over. He could not dispute his godfather’s words, nor could he deny how much he fancied Ginny. As he waited in the common room, he resolved to give the matter some serious thought.

Watching as Ginny descended her dormitory steps, a tired smile on her face, his resolve almost crumbled right then and there. She was still adjusting to the early mornings, and Harry thought she looked downright cute when she was grumpy. Despite the desire he felt for her, he held back, knowing that this was not something to enter into lightly. He had to be sure this was what he wanted before he made a move.

“Good morning, Gin,” he greeted her brightly.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “You’re entirely too chipper for this early in the morning,” she half-heartedly complained.

“It’s good to see you too,” he responded, ignoring her comment entirely. “Did you sleep well?”

“I slept just fine until my alarm woke me up at this ungodly hour,” she fired back.

Harry just smiled back at her. "You ready to head out?"

She nodded drowsily. "I still don't see why we have to wake up so early for this."

"Oh quit grumbling. The fresh air will wake you right up."

"I've got something that'll wake you up," Ginny muttered barely loud enough for Harry to hear.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Nothing," Ginny replied.

"Darn right, nothing," Harry tried to scold, though his smile gave him away. "Now come on, or we'll be short on time." He held his arm out to her, and she obligingly slid her hand into the crook of his elbow. He smiled as they set off for the grounds and their morning workout.

Nearly two hours later, Harry found himself sitting in the Room of Requirement waiting for Ginny to finish getting ready for the day. She always took a little bit longer to get ready than he did, but he did not mind it. He would rather wait a couple minutes for her than leave her waiting on him. Ginny walked out of her changing room with a smile on her face.

"Whatcha doing tomorrow?" she asked him.

Harry rose from his seat and shrugged. "Training. Why?"

"I was wondering if I could still take you up on that offer you made me yesterday."

"Oh," Harry replied, caught slightly off guard. "Yes, of course. When did you have in mind?"

She shrugged. "After breakfast?"

"Okay, after breakfast it is," he amicably agreed.

"Thanks."

OoOoO

As promised, Harry accompanied Ginny up to his office after breakfast the next morning. He was not entirely sure if she was just looking for company or if she wanted to share some of her memories with him, so he came prepared with a book to read just in case. As it turned out, Ginny wanted both. There were long stretches of time where she was quiet, but then she would all of a sudden start telling him about her first time on a broom or the time Fred and George filled Ron's bed with spiders after Ron had made her cry. Here was yet another incident of the twins contributing to Ron's arachnophobia.

She shared several memories of life at the Burrow with her family, playing with her brothers or even just spending time together in the family room sharing the details of their days. She talked about how it felt to be the youngest as each of her brothers started Hogwarts until she was finally the only one left at the Burrow during his first year. She told him about how she and Ron had become very close in the years leading up to his first year at Hogwarts and how he had wanted absolutely nothing to do with her when he came back that next summer.

Harry could feel the anxiety pouring off of her in waves. He knew what she was approaching, and now he could guess why she had been so easily taken in by the diary. She was lonely. She had been all alone for almost a year with only the hope that when Ron came home she would have her best friend back, but Ron dashed that hope rather effectively. When she found the diary, she must have been happy just to have someone to talk to, and the fact that the diary would not be able to make new friends and leave her behind must have appealed to her all the more.

She fell silent after she had related the summer before her first year. Harry reached out and grasped her hand, which had been clutching the sofa cushion. He gave it a comforting squeeze wishing he could do more for her, but he knew that this was one battle Ginny would have to fight for herself. He had let his past control him for far too

long, and while facing it had been a gruelling process, it needed to be done. It was time Ginny laid her own demons to rest.

He stared forward as he contemplated what Ginny must be facing. He wondered what she remembered of the ordeal. He knew that she had some blank spots in her memory after being possessed, but he wondered exactly what she was cognizant of. He also could not help but wonder what Tom had said to her or even shown her in the diary.

He was broken out of his thoughts by a soft sniffle. He turned his head and saw tear tracks streaking down Ginny's cheeks. Without conscious thought, he turned toward her and, still holding her hand in his left, he reached his right hand out to gently wipe her tears away with the pad of his thumb. Ginny's eyes flew open at the contact, wide with panic, and he felt her body stiffen. Her eyes immediately sought his own, and Harry felt his heart ache at her pain. She was breathing heavily but seemed to be calming down now that she had identified the source of contact. He belatedly realised that she might have mistaken him for Tom Riddle.

It would make sense, after all, to connect the contact to him when Tom had been the focus of her thoughts. Add to that the fact that the 16 year old Tom Riddle resembled Harry, and Ginny's reaction was completely understandable. Her eyes travelled down his face to his right shoulder, then down his arm to the hand that was still cupping her cheek. Harry sat frozen in place, unsure what to do. Should he pull his hand away? Was he making her uncomfortable? Or would that just make things worse?

In the end, it was Ginny who guided him. He remembered being in a similar situation not too long ago where he had been in need of comfort and she had been there for him. At the time he probably would have claimed he did not need it, but he now knew that was not the case. Whether she would admit it or not, she needed comfort, and she was going to get it. He brushed away the last tear on her far cheek, then lifted his hand to do the same for her near cheek. Harry watched as Ginny's eyes followed every movement his hand made. He was unable to determine what she was thinking or feeling, but he took the fact that she was not pushing him away as a good sign.

When he brushed the last of her tears away, he pulled his hand away, but not before lightly brushing against her cheek one last time. As he was just pulling his hand away, Ginny's hand trapped his against her cheek, holding it against her skin for a long moment as she closed her eyes. After a moment she let go, and Harry's hand dropped into his lap. Ginny's eyes opened and found their way back to his. Harry swallowed thickly before asking, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," she replied after heaving a heavy sigh.

He gave her hand a squeeze before letting it go and patting his lap and saying, "Lie down."

Her eyes searched his for a moment before she relented. She scooted away from him then swung her legs up over the arm of the sofa as she dropped back with her head resting in his lap.

Harry's right hand immediately moved to the weight now resting in his lap. He rested the hand behind her head and ran his fingers through her hair, lightly touching her scalp. His other hand sought hers out, lying at her side. He sat there looking down at her as he played with her hair for a minute before he looked up and stared blankly across the room. There was a long minute of silence as Harry's thoughts swirled around his brain as he attempted to find some way to help her. An idea began to form in his head, and before he could rethink his plan, he spoke up. "I had another vision last night."

He looked down to find her staring up at him with wide eyes.

After a moment he turned his gaze back up across the room before continuing, "He attacked a wizarding family last night. The only people there were a married couple, though I saw some pictures of kids on their mantle." He broke off for a moment as he imagined those kids learning of their parents' fate. He shook his head clear of those thoughts and continued. "My guess is they are grown and had already moved out. When Voldemort and the Death Eaters broke in, the couple panicked. They didn't grab their wands and try to fight back; they didn't even try to run."

He paused, still staring out into nothingness before dropping his gaze back down to Ginny. She was still staring up at him, concern evident in her eyes. He gave her a small, sad smile as he continued his narrative. "Instead of fighting, they tried to bargain for their lives. They offered money, their home, all their possessions, and even offered to join the Death Eaters. They begged and pleaded for their lives until Voldemort got bored and killed them. Even as Voldemort killed his wife, the husband just stood idle and watched. He made no move to stop them or intercept the curse. All he did was beg and plead and cry."

He twirled a lock of her hair around his finger for a moment as he reflected on the vision. It was not a pleasant thing to witness, nor was it easy to share. He forced his thoughts back to the matter at hand as he steeled himself to continue on. He was not sure how Ginny would react to his next question. After a minute of silence, he asked, "Why did you steal the diary back from me?" Her eyes widened, but she made no move to speak. "I've wondered about that. He thought you were afraid he'd tell me all your secrets, but that's not the real reason, is it?"

Her mouth fell open, but no sound came out.

He resumed his earlier action of running his fingers through her hair as he continued, "I believed him at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I doubted it. Protecting your secrets may have been part of the reason, but I think there was much more to it."

"I - I was afraid," Ginny choked out in a whisper.

"What were you afraid of?" Harry asked softly, gazing down into her face. He squeezed her hand a little tighter in comfort.

"I was scared," she broke off and turned her head away from him. "I was scared he'd fool you too." She sighed and turned her head back so that she was gazing up at him again. Her eyes met his for a brief moment before she averted her gaze to the side. "He already had a strong enough hold on me by then that he could tell I had the diary back without me ever writing in it. I opened it hoping to find out what he'd written to you or you to him, and he started writing to me. He told

me he'd been talking to you and that he told you that I was the one responsible for all the attacks. He said you'd get me kicked out of Hogwarts for sure. Then he went into how much you trusted him and that it would only be a matter of time before he took control of you too."

"I knew I couldn't try to throw the diary away again or else you might find it. He had enough control by then that he could make me open the diary up and read whatever he had to write." A shudder ran down her spine as she continued. "Every day it felt like I lost a little bit more of myself, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I wanted to tell somebody, but I was scared. The few times I tried, either something happened to interrupt or Tom managed to get control and stop me."

They were both quiet for a long moment before he spoke again. "Do you see the difference?" Her eyes flicked back to his, her question evident. "You could have left the diary with me and left me to my fate. You could have rolled over and died, accepting your own fate. That whole time you never stopped fighting. That's not something to be ashamed of. Yes, you made some mistakes, but you were eleven years old. Don't let yourself get caught up in that." His voice was thick and heavy with emotion as he continued. "At eleven years, you stood up and fought where grown adults would have lain down and died. Besides, your past has shaped you into who you are today, and I wouldn't trade you for anything."

His hand had slid from the back of her head to cup her cheek as he looked down on her with affection. She gave him a watery smile as tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. "Do you really mean that?" she asked in barely a whisper.

"I do," he responded. "I think that's the way you need to think about things in order to be okay with them. You can't let yourself get caught up in the bad things, but look at it from the bigger picture. Like, if Dumbledore hadn't left me at the Dursleys, I'd be an entirely different person today. It doesn't make it okay, but it helps me to accept it and move past it. I like who I am now. And as much as I'd like to change my past, you can't change it without also changing yourself."

Harry fell silent after that, watching Ginny as she digested what he had said. "I've never thought of it that way," she said after a short period of silence.

"You actually helped me to see it that way," Harry admitted.

Ginny's eyebrows rose into her hairline at that statement. "How did I help you come to that conclusion?"

Harry smiled indulgently. "Remember last Christmas when I thought I might have been possessed by Voldemort?" he asked rhetorically. She nodded. "You were the only one who was able to break through to me - made me feel awful about myself too, by the way. The only reason you were able to do that was because of your past. I thought about that a lot this summer, what you had gone through and how you had turned out in spite of it. I realised the experience had only made you stronger."

She shook her head in his lap. "I'm not strong. Look at me; I can't even face what happened to me. I don't want to face it. I've hidden from it for so long, but I've never forgotten about it. I couldn't forget even if I wanted to. I can still feel him inside of me," she finished off in barely a whisper.

Harry felt his body tense at her last admission. "What do you mean?" he asked with not a little dread.

She did not answer immediately but stared straight up at the ceiling. After a moment, she turned her gaze to meet his and spoke. "You don't get touched by that kind of evil without it leaving its mark." Harry's hand unconsciously rose to his scar at that pronouncement as he looked at her with wide eyes. She gave him a haunted smile. "I don't have any physical marks, thankfully, but I can feel a faint trace of him." She gulped heavily, and as she continued, there was a slight quiver to her voice. "It's like a small piece of me will always be dirty or tainted. I'm lucky that's all that's left of him, but that small bit is a constant reminder of what I let happen." Her voice was beginning to take on a steely, determined quality. "It's also a reminder of why I cannot allow anything like that to happen ever again."

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The next day Harry could not stop thinking about Ginny and what she had admitted about her encounter with the Diary. He wondered if that lingering feeling was just a figment of her imagination, something she had imposed upon herself, or if it was something more. Could Tom have left some small part of himself inside of her? Was it in any way similar to the connection he shared with Voldemort? Regardless, the knowledge that she felt as if she would be forever tainted by her experiences was a haunting reality – one that made Harry feel all the worse for never having talked to Ginny about her experience before this year. If there was anyone who knew what that felt like, it was he.

He had been uncertain how to react to her admission and settled for squeezing her hand and returning his other hand to its earlier task of running through her hair. They had remained together in that position until lunch time. They had not really talked at all after that, and Harry did not even know whether or not she had resumed the task of sorting through her memories. It had not seemed right to ask at the time as he did not want her to feel as if he was pressuring her. He wanted her to take the time she needed to process her emotions.

She had been somewhat subdued and pensive for the rest of the evening but by the following morning was back to her normal, lively self. He felt that the subject was far from over but knew better than to force the issue. Not only was she more than capable of taking care of herself, but she had been dealing with the trauma for years. If and when she ever needed to revisit it again, he would be there to help. Until then, he was glad to have the normal Ginny back.

Professor McGonagall had briefly interrupted their breakfast that morning to tell Harry of her intent to visit his classes that day. Harry was a bit surprised - not that she would be watching his classes, but that she decided to tell him beforehand. He supposed she was just being polite so that he was not startled by her appearance. While eating his breakfast he pondered over his head of house. She had astonished him a lot this year. Her acceptance of him as something of an equal had shocked him, but she had stuck to the promise she made to him at the beginning of the school year.

A nudge in his side interrupted his thoughts. "You're being quiet; what're you thinking about?" Ginny asked him.

"Nothing," he replied. When Ginny raised an eyebrow in challenge, Harry said, "Professor McGonagall." Ginny's expression did not change, causing Harry to chuckle. "She's surprised me a lot over the past year."

"Probably not half as much as you've surprised her," Ginny interjected, reaching across his body to kip some bangers from his plate.

Harry laughed some more as he watched her chew then swallow part of his meal. "True," he admitted, nudging her leg with his knee.

"How has she surprised you?" Ginny inquired, pushing back against his leg with her own as she plucked a strip of bacon off his plate.

Harry switched her empty plate with his and began filling it up with more food. "She's treated me normally - not like a kid. Did you know she even asked me to call her Minerva in private?"

"You're kidding," Ginny sputtered. She completely ignored the plate of food Harry had placed before her and was scooping up a forkful of scrambled eggs off Harry's new plate.

Harry just looked at her for a moment before he stonily answered, "No, I'm not." Harry shook his head at her and scooted over to bump her hip just as she was bringing his eggs to her mouth, causing the eggs to shake off her fork and onto her robes. He smirked mischievously as he continued, "She's treated me almost like an equal. If she wasn't so close to Dumbledore, I'd probably try to go to her for some additional help with my training, but I can't risk showing her anything that she might later relate to him."

Ginny turned her head to him, narrowing her eyes frigidly for a moment before she brushed the egg off her robes. She began to reach for another forkful of his eggs as she asked, "Don't you think you're being a bit..." she trailed off for a moment as she dumped her eggs on his robes before finishing, "paranoid?"

He glared at her and admitted, "Maybe," as he brushed the egg from his robes. "But I'd rather not take any chances. You know Dumbledore would never let me do half the things I've done since June - neither would McGonagall if she knew. The only difference is that I think she'd leave the final decision up to me after giving me a piece of her mind; Dumbledore would take the decision out of my hands. Until I'm prepared for it, he cannot know what I can do; otherwise I get locked up in the castle and sent off to live with the Dursleys until he deems me ready, so maybe in about ten or twenty years."

"What are you two plotting now?" Neville's voice broke into their conversation.

Harry turned to find Neville seating himself across from him as Ginny answered in feigned innocence, "Us? Plotting?"

"You two can be worse than the twins," Neville stated factually. "Though I have to say I appreciate your tastes in both pranks and targets better than theirs."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Harry said with a wide smile on his face.

"I'm sure," Neville replied with a roll of his eyes as he filled up his plate. He paused with a spoon in the air as he turned his head towards them. "Hermione's onto the two of you, you know. I heard her muttering about it after your run-in with Snape. She's sure it was you; she just doesn't have any idea how you got away with it."

"If Hermione was smart, she'd let it lie," Ginny muttered.

Neville laughed. "Good luck with that. I'm curious myself, but I know better than to pry. I'm not that great at magic, but if you ever need another accomplice, I wouldn't mind getting back at a few Slytherins."

"We'll be sure to keep that in mind. And thanks for the heads up," Harry said.

"No problem," Neville replied as he lifted a bite of eggs to his mouth. After swallowing, he put his fork down. "So what were you really talking about, if you don't mind my asking?"

Harry turned to Ginny as she answered, "Professor McGonagall."

Neville's eyebrows rose to his hairline as he looked back and forth between them. "You're serious?"

"She's visiting my classes today," Harry inserted.

"Who's visiting your classes today?" Hermione asked as she seated herself beside Neville and across from Ginny.

"Professor McGonagall," Neville replied for him.

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Oh? Is she going to be evaluating you or...?" she trailed off looking at Harry expectantly.

"I wouldn't say evaluating, no," Harry replied. He tried to search for a way to describe what he saw it as. "She's decided to take a more active role in things. She's going to attend one of each class every month and meet with me afterwards to discuss the classes and relay any information pertinent to my role as an Assistant Professor."

Hermione let out a distinct and short "Hm," at Harry's explanation.

"What?" Harry asked, knowing she had something on her mind.

"Oh, it's nothing. I just think they should have been doing that from the start," she said carefully. "It just seemed a bit irresponsible to leave you to your own devices, never checking up on you or anything." She paused for a second, then hastily added, "Not that I think you need to be supervised or anything. You're a wonderful teacher; it just always struck me as odd that they didn't supervise you in any way."

"It's okay," Harry replied. "I felt the exact same way. That's why I brought it up with her in the first place."

"You brought it up?" Hermione asked with both surprise and, if Harry was not mistaken, a bit of pride in her voice.

"Yeah," Harry answered, unsure what to make of Hermione's tone. "I felt the same way you did. It was odd that they just let me have free reign. Dumbledore encouraged the other professors to visit my classes but never set up any sort of system of it. Unless Dumbledore knows some way to fool my contract, he's never actually visited a class himself."

"Do you think he has?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think so, but I don't know. He knows the charms I used on it, and if anyone could find a way around them, it would be him. I just don't see why he would go to the trouble."

"You don't see why who would go through what trouble?" Ron asked as he sat next to Harry and immediately began filling his plate.

Harry sighed and was about to answer when Ginny piped up from his other side, giving a quick synopsis of all that had been said thus far. The rest of breakfast passed by smoothly with idle conversation as they all ate their fill. After the meal, Harry headed straight to the Room of Requirement, while the others returned to Gryffindor Tower. He liked to set up the entire room before any of the students arrived, and the extra time gave him the opportunity to review his plans for the class. Today was a big day for the class as they were beginning his dodging exercises. They were just finishing up Patronuses. Like the IHA, most of the students were unable to manage a corporeal Patronus. The majority could produce a strong mist, however, which would hopefully be enough to buy them some time in the event of a Dementor attack.

He immediately began setting up the room, creating all the different duelling circles for the dodging exercises. He spent his time casting the spells as he mentally reviewed his plans of introducing the activity to the class. He remained in solitude until a quarter of the hour, when Professor McGonagall entered the room.

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Professor McGonagall strode into the Room of Requirement to find a large, mostly empty room with circular patterns painted across the floor, which she recognised from her previous visit to Harry's classes. The only occupant of the room, Harry, was pacing back and forth seemingly lost in thought. Without outwardly showing any indication that he was even aware of her presence, Harry called out, "Good morning, Minerva."

"Good morning, Harry," she replied in kind, walking leisurely towards him. "All set for your class?"

"Yes, I always come here straight from breakfast," he answered, turning towards her. "I don't need a full hour to prepare, but it's nice to have some quiet time before class starts to get all my thoughts in order."

"I think I can understand that," she replied smilingly. "Though it took me a lot longer than you to realise it."

"Well you don't have as much of an opportunity, with classes beginning immediately after breakfast," he commented. "Although I suppose that's why several of the professors always leave before the meal is through."

"Yes, you've figured us out," she responded. Knowing how she felt when her own quiet pre-class time was interrupted, she decided to let him have his silence. "Well, I'll let you return to your thoughts. As before, I will simply observe the class. Unless you ask for my involvement, I will let you handle everything, except in the case of an emergency."

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile as he returned to his earlier pacing.

She wandered over to a corner of the room and pulled out her wand to conjure herself a chair. Before she could even begin the incantation, a straight-backed wooden chair materialized before her eyes. Old habits died hard, she thought to herself as she replaced her wand within her robes and lowered herself onto the chair. She knew of the room's capabilities, of course, but was unused to having them

at her disposal. She contented herself with watching Harry pace as she waited for the class to begin.

She pondered over the young man before her. She had paid extra attention to him in Transfiguration class that week but could neither confirm nor deny her suspicions over his true abilities. He remained a mystery to her. She wondered what his motivation could be for holding back, assuming that was actually the case. Did he wish to stay out of the spotlight? That would certainly fit in with his personality, but she doubted that was the reason. It seemed too trivial.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the door to the room opened, and a few students entered. She watched as Harry greeted each of the students by name, asking them how their first week back in class had gone. More students followed in shortly thereafter, and all received a greeting of some sort from Harry. He spoke to some, waved to others, and nodded his greeting to a few. It was not long before Harry made his way to the front of the room to begin his lesson. Before addressing the students, he pulled out a roll of parchment and mumbled a few words. His eyes scanned the crowd, and Minerva looked down at herself to find that she was glowing a faint red. She had almost forgotten about the contract he had asked all his students to sign. She had been rather curious about it in the beginning but let it slip her mind. Perhaps she would ask him about it later.

When she looked back up, Harry had already tucked the parchment back into his robes. He announced that they would start off the class by practising their Patronuses some more, followed by a new activity that he would explain when the time came. She watched as Harry stepped off the small stage and approached a group of seven students who had not immediately set off to work. Curious, she rose from her chair and walked around the edge of the room towards them to hear what was being said.

"How are your Patronuses coming?" Harry asked the group at large.

Mary-Jo Clark, a Slytherin fifth year, exuberantly responded, "I did it! I conjured a corporeal Patronus!"

Minerva felt her eyebrows rise in surprise at the extraordinary feat of the fifth year. She looked from the girl's excited face to Harry's, only to find his expression mirroring his student's.

"That's fantastic," Harry exclaimed, his eyes practically twinkling. "What form did it take?"

"A fox," she answered unhesitantly.

"A sly one, huh?" Harry ribbed smilingly. Mary-Jo blushed and ducked her head down. "Congratulations. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks," she mumbled shyly.

Harry turned his head to take in the rest of the group. "I know you three already can do it," he said, addressing the three students standing furthest to his left. "How about the rest of you?"

"Still just mist," Nicholas, a Gryffindor fourth year supplied; the other two nodded their agreement.

"Hey, it took me longer than three weeks to learn it, and I had our Defence Professor that year teaching me. Besides, I saw the mist you were creating last class, and it was strong. All of you. It's only a matter of time before your Patronuses take form." He smiled encouragingly at the four, and Minerva noticed them stand up a bit straighter at Harry's words. "Now, I want you all to join the others and practice your Patronuses for ten minutes, then I want Nicholas and Mary-Jo to team up against the rest of you."

Their two jaws nearly hit the ground before Harry continued. "You'll be barricaded behind a metre-high wall. Your job will just be to hold the others at bay. The rest of you will be trying to incapacitate the two of them and take their position. Anything goes, but no counters. As soon as you're hit with a curse, you're stuck with it. If you have time, switch it up to Lindsey and Jack and do it again. Any questions?"

Seven heads shook no.

"Alright then; get to it," Harry commanded. The seven joined the rest of their classmates and began working on their Patronuses as Harry began to wander amongst the students, making comments and giving encouragements as he went. Minerva found herself standing off to the side of the room wondering what exactly was happening. Why were they receiving separate instructions? And what exactly were they in reference to? She resolved to keep an eye on those seven students. She would know what was going on in about ten minutes, she presumed.

She passed the time watching the large group of students as they struggled with the advanced spell. The fact that every single student was able to produce a decently strong mist spoke either of the calibre of the students or the teacher. She was inclined to believe it was largely the latter.

The ten minutes passed quickly, and Minerva positioned herself unobtrusively along the wall just outside the designated perimeter. The students all walked over together. There was some good natured ribbing going on among them as the other five taunted the two students to be holed up behind the wall. After a minute, the two teams split up. Nicholas and Mary-Jo disappeared from her sight behind the wall.

The other five students all huddled together and spoke in hushed voices as they presumably discussed strategy. After a couple minutes their huddle broke up and Jack Trowers, a Hufflepuff Fifth year, called out, "Ready?" A hand reached up above the rock with its thumb up. "Here we come then," Jack announced.

In a flash two bodies rolled out on each side of the wall. Two Stunners left each wand before the students rolled back behind the cover of their wall. By the time their five attackers realised what was going on, one of their number had fallen, and the rest were sending spells into empty space.

As soon as they rolled back under cover, both students popped to their feet from behind the wall, firing hexes from the moment they emerged. Another student went down from a Stunner, while a second was hit with a minor hex. By the time the attackers had thought to

return fire, Nicholas and Mary-Jo had both dropped back behind the cover of their wall.

Before they had a chance to regroup, both Nicholas and Mary-Jo popped out on the same side of the wall. They both directed a stream of curses at Jack. The Hufflepuff was prepared to block the spells this time, but the concentrated attack was too much. He blocked the first two hexes, but a Petrificus Totalus slipped through, rendering him immobile.

Mary-Jo and Nicholas barely ducked back behind their wall in time to avoid the barrage of spells the other two sent. A moment later they attempted the same tactic on the other end, but their attackers were prepared for it this time. The instant the two appeared, hexes were already flying their way.

Nicholas and Mary-Jo each got off their initial hex but no more. Seeing the hexes flying at them and having no time to react, Nicholas pushed Mary-Jo behind him and shielded her from the spells with his own body. He was knocked out with a stunner as was another of their attackers.

All that was left of the attackers was Ryan Jenkins, Mary-Jo's housemate. It was a one-on-one battle now, and Mary-Jo had the advantage of her cover. Using the wall to shield herself from Ryan's attack, she was able to defend the wall and eventually subdue the Slytherin boy.

With her opponents all out of commission, Mary-Jo bent over with her hands on her knees as she attempted to recover from the ordeal; meanwhile the rest were all still incapacitated in one form or another. After a moment Mary-Jo walked over to Nicholas and revived him. She gave him a shy smile as she thanked him for saving her. The boy smiled as he ducked his head and muttered something Minerva did not catch.

Harry appeared seemingly out of nowhere and began reviving all the students. When everyone was awake and hex-free, he stood before the assembled group. "Well, I hope you all learned something from that. First of all, never underestimate your opponent, no matter the

odds. Those same odds can quickly turn against you, as you all no doubt noticed. Also, position is critical in any battle. Gaining the superior position and using it wisely can be the key to your victory. Third, always be on your guard. You attackers called for the battle to begin, but you were unprepared for the assault you received.”

He paused and looked from one student to the next as they thought over his words. After his eyes had passed over each student, he spoke again. “I think that’s enough for today. We’re starting a new activity today which will take some time to get organised. Go on back over with the rest of your classmates.”

While the students all returned to the rest of the class and Harry made his way back up to the stage, Minerva reflected over everything she had just seen. There was obviously more occurring in these classes than she had known. She wondered at Harry’s decision to single those seven students out amongst all their peers.

She could not help but be impressed with not only Mary-Jo and Nicholas for their ingenuity, but the others as well for the way they recovered and refused to give in, not to mention the skill with which they all cast their spells.

Her musings were cut short as Harry whistled to gain the class’s attention. He proceeded to explain about the new dodging exercises. He did more than just explain what the task, however. He also told them exactly why it was so integral that they take the drill seriously. To prove his point, he said, he would offer a demonstration.

He picked out Patrick Klempsey, a fifth year chaser on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, to help him demonstrate and instructed the boy where to stand and what to do. He explained how the exercise would work, then called for Patrick to start. Harry began a relentless torrent of Stinging Hexes on the Ravenclaw, until he finally took pity on the boy and ended the demonstration.

Harry immediately removed any lingering effects from the Stinging Hexes and informed Patrick that it was his turn. A feral grin spread across the boy’s face at his anticipated revenge, but it was not to be. If she had been impressed with Harry’s speed of spell casting, that

was nothing compared to the awe she felt at the speed at which Harry moved on his feet.

He ran, jumped, spun, dove, rolled, pivoted, and jerked his body all around. It was almost like he was dancing in some awkward fashion, but it was at the same time much more impressive than even the most accomplished dancers putting on an exhibition. As Harry twisted around every which way avoiding the Stinging Hexes that Patrick was firing off as rapidly as he could manage, she could not help but feel like the scene was all too familiar. She had the strange feeling of déjà vu, but she could not place it.

When all was said and done, it was unclear if any of the hexes had even connected with Harry. She did not see him cancel the hex, so he was either unhexed or simply unfazed by the effects. Patrick was not altogether happy at the outcome of events. Harry nodded his head in thanks, and Patrick returned the gesture with a tight smile.

“As you can see, you don’t need a wand to defend yourself against an attack,” Harry proclaimed to the class. “It will take a lot of practice and hard work to get your body conditioned to the exercise, but the ability could one day save your life.” He then had the students all pair off and begin the exercise, giving a stern warning to those who decided not to take the drill seriously. “If I see anybody slacking off, you’ll have the privilege of teaming up with me, and I can guarantee it won’t be a pleasant experience.”

“He’s not kidding,” Patrick announced ruefully, generating a small chuckle amongst the crowd of students.

The students split up after a few more words from Harry and found partners. The drills began, and Harry began his circuit through the room. He called out suggestions and reprimanded a few students who did not appear to be putting forth all their effort into stinging their partners, but all in all the new exercise went off with nary a hitch.

It was not long before the class was called to a halt, and the students went on their way. Harry let them go a bit early to allow the students

to clean up before lunch. The seven remained behind after the rest of the class.

“I hope you all realise just how much of an advantage being able to avoid spells can give you.” Seven heads nodded yes. “Good,” Harry continued, “because I expect to see you use that skill in your battles from now on. In the future we may talk about ways to improve your agility and endurance, but for now go take a shower or something; you guys stink.”

They laughed as they protested but dutifully left to do just that. She could hear the group talking and joking out in the hall as they began to split up, calling out their goodbyes to their friends. She could not help but notice that the group of seven students from all four houses got along wonderfully. She had never in her many years at Hogwarts seen such a close-knit group of students from all four houses.

She walked over to where Harry was standing. He had stared after the group, watching them fondly until they were out of sight. At that time his gaze turned to her as he waited expectantly for her to comment. She did not intend to disappoint him.

“Well I must say, Harry, your class is quite the spectacle to behold,” she began.

“Oh?” Harry asked with humour in his voice.

“Did Patrick hit you at all?”

A smile stretched across his face as he answered, “Once, but I wanted to let everyone think I escaped unscathed. It has a greater impact that way, I think.”

“It does,” she agreed. “You rather effectively burned that point in, I would say. Where did you learn to move like that?”

“Well I’ve been practising,” Harry said a bit uncomfortably.

“I know you’ve been exercising in the mornings,” she said, “but it would take far longer than a term to learn to move like that.”

He crossed his arms over his chest as he answered, “When I was younger I didn’t have any spells to protect me. I got used to dodging things.”

A part of her wanted to pursue the subject, but she could tell Harry was uncomfortable talking about it. And besides, she had been down that road with the Headmaster many times in the past. She doubted she would learn anything from Harry that the man did not already know, though it did serve to further cement her opinion on the matter – as if that was needed.

“Well,” she responded after a short, awkward silence. “I think we better be off before we miss lunch.”

After lunch, she returned to the Room of Requirement and attended Harry’s IHA class. He was teaching them the Disillusionment Charm, which caused her some worry. She did not relish having a school full of invisible troublemakers, but she could not deny the usefulness of the charm.

Half the class was spent practising the charm, and most students were performing it adequately by the time he called the activity to a halt. The other half of the class was spent doing dodging drills and duelling exercises. It was a bit anarchic having so many students all duelling in different sections of the room at once, but Harry handled the chaos remarkably well. He was seemingly always around to offer tips and suggestions, but he never lingered on one pair for very long. She could tell that he strived to pay equal attention to all his students.

She noticed that the overt animosity between some of the students she had witnessed last term was absent; though she was not convinced the problem had been resolved. Where in his BHA class she was witness to a group wholly integrated, In the IHA, there were many students who were polite and courteous, if still a little cautious, with the Slytherins, but most students simply ignored the pair. .She

supposed it was unreasonable to expect them to like each other, but at least they were willing to work together in peace.

Harry called the class to a close, offering a few last words commending his students on the hard work they had put into their exercises that day. As the students began to file out of the class, she mentally reviewed what she had seen that day and what she intended to discuss with Harry. She did not have much in the way of staff information to share with him, so her thoughts were focused exclusively on his teaching.

When the last of the students had filed out, Harry turned towards her expectantly. She took her time walking towards him, giving her mind the time it needed to organise her thoughts. When she was about a metre away from him, she stopped and looked into his eyes. He met her gaze unflinchingly.

“When did you split those seven students off from the rest of your first class?” she asked. She found herself quite curious about that group.

He hesitated a moment with his eyes going out of focus before answering, “A few weeks ago.”

“May I ask why?”

“Sure,” Harry replied as he reached his hand around to rub the back of his neck. “They’re more advanced than the rest of the class. They are always among the first to master every spell and spend a large amount of time helping the others who are struggling.”

“Why not advance them to your other class then?” she inquired curiously.

“A couple reasons, actually. First of all, with how big the class is, I need them around to help me. When learning a new spell, I need them to catch on quickly and help a few of their classmates. It keeps things moving much more quickly because with a class this big, it would take me too long to do it all by myself,” Harry explained.

“Secondly,” he continued, “They would have needed private lessons to catch them up to the intermediate class, and it would have taken quite some time to get them up to speed with the others. Thirdly, this gives them an opportunity to not only help me in class, but also have a different kind of training than the others are receiving. The intermediate class gets a little bit of the battle-type training, but not as much as those seven are getting now.”

She nodded her head with each point as she considered what he was telling her. It did make sense from his perspective to keep them in their current class. The seven seemed to be handling the responsibility of working semi-autonomously as well. She just had one concern left. “What about the rest of the class? What do they think of having those seven singled out?”

Harry shrugged. “I talked to the whole class about it. It’s not exactly a secret that some students were progressing more quickly than others. They accepted what I had to say. I haven’t noticed any sort of fallout as a result, so I assume they are okay with it.”

She nodded her acceptance. “You always need to be careful when singling students out in that manner. You never know how the class as a whole or as individuals will react. It’s important to always keep your students in mind because if they are to learn anything from you, they need to be willing.”

She paused as she pondered over how to approach her next topic. “Do you know what the biggest problem is that most people encounter while teaching peers or students close to their own age?”

She watched as Harry’s head shook in the negative before his voice echoed, “No.”

“Respect,” she answered simply. “In order to teach effectively, you have to hold the respect of your students. It is difficult to earn that kind of respect, especially from your peers.” Harry’s head nodded, and she continued, “Do you respect me, Harry?”

His head bobbed affirmative as he answered, "Yes, of course."

"And what about Professor Snape," she asked. When Harry hesitated, a smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "You can answer truthfully," she assured him.

"No," he said languorously.

"And which of us do you find to be a more effective teacher?" she asked. She then added, "Please be completely honest."

"You are," he answered firmly. "Sn – Professor Snape would sooner ridicule a student than offer his help."

She stifled a sigh as she nodded her head. "Severus thinks that he can earn respect through bullying. Instead, he earns only resentment. He is effective in keeping his classes in order, but when it comes to teaching, his methods are sorely lacking." A moment later she added, "You are not to repeat that to anyone."

Harry once again shook his head. "I won't."

"The point I am trying to convey is that respect is important for any professor to be able to teach effectively. It is difficult to earn the level of respect required because your pupils must willingly recognise you not as their equal but as their superior. To earn that level of respect amongst your peers – and at such a young age – is exceedingly difficult." She paused for a moment before continuing. "It is not as simple as being able to outperform your peers. Your students do not respect you simply for the fact that you are more skilled and knowledgeable than they; rather, they respect you as a person. If you have your students' respect, they will do the work you ask them to do, and they will learn from you." She let out a breath before continuing, "I believe you have the respect of every last one of your students, Harry."

Harry had ducked his head. She could tell he was uncomfortable with what she was saying, but she also knew it needed to be said. Someday he would have to learn how to take a compliment. "Every

once in a while, a teacher will come along who connects with his students on a deeper level. His students don't merely respect him; they look up to him, admire him, and are inspired by him. He motivates his students to work harder than he ever asks of them and to push themselves beyond their limits." She blew out a long breath before continuing, "I think you have the potential to be that teacher, Harry."

His head snapped up at her pronouncement, and his eyes met hers for a long moment before he glanced away. She could not glean what he was thinking.

"If not the rest of your students," she persisted, "the seven students from your first class may already be starting to view you in that way. I'm telling you this for a reason." His eyes refocused on her own, but he said nothing. "It is a great responsibility to be held to such esteem. I trust that you will be able to handle it spectacularly, but you should keep it in mind when considering your actions. You are responsible, in some way, for how your students grow and mature into young adults."

OoOoO

Minerva had left Harry with a lot to think about as he lay in bed later that night. He had never considered the influence he held over his students. He had never really thought of it outside of the fact that his students did the work he asked them to do. He resolved to pay more attention both to the way he acted in front of others, particularly his students, and to the way his students responded to him in class. He finished sorting his memories from the day and allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

Sirius was waiting as usual and proceeded to regale Harry with more stories, only he had switched from recounting tales of the Marauders to telling Harry about the romance of James and Lily Potter. He never specifically pushed at Harry to act on his feelings for Ginny, for which Harry was grateful, but the message was clear enough. The truth of the matter was that Harry was finding it hard to continue coming up with reasons not to tell Ginny how he felt. He appreciated that despite the way his relationship with Cho ended, he really need not worry

about history repeating itself. He and Cho had never had any relationship to speak of apart from their brief, fleeting romance, so it was no wonder things fell apart so easily. He had faith that things would work out with Ginny one way or another, as friends or as something more.

Sirius's stories certainly played their part in that. Nearly every night, Harry heard about how happy James had been when he was able to first garner Lily's friendship, - not a light feat given his mum's resistance - and then the pure ecstasy he experienced when their relationship had deepened into much more. Harry wished he could have been more confident of what he was feeling, like his father had been, but he remained uncertain of the depth of his affection for Ginny. He knew he fancied her but was not sure it was love, nor did he know beyond a doubt that Ginny was the only girl for him. He knew his situation was entirely different from his father's, yet he could not help but want that same thing for himself.

The week crept by with Harry's thoughts battling one another, but each day he could feel his reluctance fading. He was still worried about the fallout from a failed romance, but he did not want to let himself be ruled by his fears. He wanted Ginny. He could spend all day listing all the qualities he liked in her, and it was a daily struggle to keep himself from just blurting his feelings out to her or from attempting to steal a kiss from her.

It was Tuesday evening as he lay in bed pondering his situation with Ginny that a thought struck him. Careful not to wake anyone, he enlarged his trunk on his bed inside of his curtains. He quietly dug through his possessions until he found what he was looking for: an envelope with his name on it. He shrunk his trunk back down and tucked it away as he lifted the envelope back into his hands, turning it over as he stared down at it.

He carefully extracted the two pieces of parchment. He placed one in his lap along with the envelope as he unfolded the other parchment. His mother's flowery script flowed through the page. He read through the entire contents of the letter, but it was at the end where he found what he was looking for.

Always stick up for what you believe in and follow your dreams through to the end. Don't let others dictate how to live your life. Your life is your own to live as you see fit. And if you find love, hold onto it with everything you have. Believe me when I say that it is worth it.

Wiping away the tears that had pooled in the corner of his eyes, Harry carefully refolded the parchment and lifted the other from his lap. It was his father's letter that had spurred him to dig the letters out of his trunk, and it was the advice of his father that Harry was searching for. He found it.

One day you're going to find a woman who is everything you could ever hope for in a partner. When you find the one, never let go. Fight to the end of the Earth for her if you have to. There will never be a more important battle than the one you wage for the love of your life.

He had no idea if Ginny was the love of his life, and he knew that his situation was entirely different than his father's had been when pursuing his mother. But his father's words echoed in his mind as he lay in bed that night, leaving little doubt of the advice his father would give him if given the opportunity. He did not share that revelation with Sirius that night even as his godfather continued to regale Harry with stories of his parents. Harry needed the time to think it over on his own without the added pressure.

The next morning he found his breakfast interrupted by the arrival of an owl at breakfast. Fred and George had sent him a letter.

To Our Propitiously Prolific Partner,

Included in this post is our standard progress report on the shop. As you can no doubt see, things are going very well. You may also be interested to know that our little side project has been progressing quite well. We hope to meet with D sometime in February to give a demonstration and make our offer. As the mastermind, we thought you might like your own demonstration. Let us know when and where.

Cordially yours,

F&G

The letter was so absurd in its seeming formality that Harry was left mildly disoriented by it. Either the twins had found a new brand of comedy, or the business world was bringing out a more serious side to the pranksters. Looking at the greeting, Harry was inclined to believe it was the former. Regardless, he was quite anxious to find out what the twins had devised. He had time to get back to them as they were only now in mid-January, but he resolved to think over where and when might be the best time to arrange a 'demonstration' as they had called it.

He showed Ginny the letter later that day, and her reaction mirrored his own. She was entirely unsure what to make of the affability of it, but she too was curious to find out what her brothers had come up with. She even asked Harry if she could go along for this demonstration, to which he immediately agreed.

OoOoO

Ginny lay in her bed that Friday night, curled under the warmth of her blankets. She had made a habit of heading to bed early over the past week to give herself some private time to continue sorting through her memories. It was about a week ago that she had begun this daunting task. What had at one time seemed over-whelming was now winding down. She had done things mostly chronologically and was now working through the previous term.

It was impossible not to notice, as she relived her numerous memories from last fall, that one person had quickly taken up a prominent role in her life. He went from an acquaintance, to a friend, and now to something so much more. What that something more was, she could not yet put a label on. She knew what she wanted it to be but was not yet sure whether or not she would get her wish. The more memories of Harry she sorted, the more she pondered over her relationship with him. She wished Harry would just give her some sign as to what he was thinking, but she could not read anything of his behaviour since the ball. It was almost like he just wanted to forget that they had almost kissed.

At least, that was how she had been thinking up until the beginning of that week. Now she was not even sure what she thought. It all started over the weekend when she had asked Harry to keep her company while sorting through her memories. She had not actually planned on sharing much of anything with him, but as she was reviewing some of her early memories, she felt compelled to share them with Harry. She realised that he would not have had any fond childhood memories, and she hoped that maybe he could enjoy some vicariously through her.

It had been pleasant to share those early memories with Harry. They were not all happy, but life was never perfect. What mattered was that she had a family that loved her. As she began drawing closer to her time at Hogwarts, however, the memories became more difficult to talk about. She knew she would have to face the diary and Tom again – Harry had warned her of that explicitly – but actually doing it was more difficult than she could have imagined.

Then Harry stepped in. It was still a gruelling process, but being able to draw comfort and reassurance from Harry made all the difference in the world. It was not just in his words but also the physical comfort he provided her. He helped keep her grounded and anchored as she forced herself through all the memories.

Since then there had been a few moments where Harry seemed to be flirting with her, but she was never quite sure if she was just looking too hard and fabricating things. She felt slightly shameful for wishing Harry would get a move on and let her know how he felt. She knew that this was not an easy time for him. Granted, no time ever seemed easy for Harry, but with the visions he had been experiencing lately, she could understand if he had just not been able to rouse himself to action. But she had no guarantee that was even the case. For all she knew, he had misgivings and decided not to pursue a relationship with her. If so, she doubted he would ever actually address the issue with her and simply continue being her friend, like he had been the last couple weeks.

It was a frustrating circle of thought. Waiting would be so much easier if she just had some indication of whether or not he was even still thinking about it. If he wanted to remain friends, she would be hurt, of

course, but she could handle it. She just needed to know definitively where their relationship stood. She could not decide whether or not she should broach the subject with him. She did not want him to think she was trying to rush his decision. The last thing she intended was to put any additional pressure on him. She resolved to wait it out a bit longer. She would continue to look for signs when she was with Harry and avoid thinking too much about him when they were apart - or try, at any rate.

She had told Harry she would finish sorting her memories that night, so they had scheduled their first Occlumency lesson for the following day directly after lunch. Dragging her thoughts away from Harry, she forced herself to resume the task of sorting her remaining memories. An hour later, she finished sorting that day's memories. With a smile on her face at the accomplishment, she allowed herself to finally drift off to sleep.

Ginny was anxious all the next morning knowing that she would begin a new stage of her training that afternoon. By lunchtime, her anxiety turned to nervousness. She knew that she had nothing to worry about; she trusted Harry. Even so, she was unable to shake the thought that in less than an hour somebody would be attempting to break into her mind. She could not help but worry that her thoughts would be read, though she knew Harry would never intentionally violate her privacy in such a way.

Harry had admitted, however, that he had never performed Legilimency and that there might be a bit of a learning curve involved. She was uncertain how exactly that problem might manifest itself. Perhaps it would take him a while just to get the spell to work. Or perhaps he would initially be unable to control it - meaning he might break into her mind and not know how to get out without seeing something private.

She knew that sorting her memories was supposed to counteract that, but she was not sure if she had even done that correctly. Would her memories remain locked up and out of sight if Harry broke into her mind? She hoped so.

The meal was over too quickly, and she made her excuses to her friends. It was a rare meal that Harry and Ginny did not sit together, but today they had arranged it so that they sat separately with their friends. Not only did this afford them both the opportunity to spend some quality time with their respective friends, it also allowed them to leave at different times while meeting up in his office without anyone being any the wiser.

She left first, travelling toward the library. When she reached the fourth floor, however, she continued up to the fifth and made her way down the corridor to Harry's office. She let herself in and seated herself in one of the armchairs as she waited for Harry to arrive. The wait was not long, as Harry strode into the office just a few short minutes later. He smiled at her when he saw her seated in the armchair. With a wave of his hand, a fire sprang up in the grate to her left. He chose the armchair across from her and greeted, "Hey."

"Hey," she parroted back. "How was lunch?"

"It was alright," he replied easily. "Same old, really. Ron and Hermione are arguing again - though it does beat the awkward silence, so I guess I shouldn't complain. Neville kept things bearable."

"That's good," she said a bit distractedly. Her mind was again wandering to their impending lesson.

"I missed you at lunch today," he said, unprompted.

That was enough to catch her attention. Her eyes shot to his, and she straightened in her chair. "Oh?" she said noncommittally.

His cheeks turned a very faint pink, almost unnoticeably so, as he continued, "We always have lunch together. It just didn't quite feel right without you."

She smiled widely at his admission. He had been making comments like that for the past couple days. She was not sure, but she thought he might be trying to tell her how he felt about her, in his own unique little way. It was kind of cute, she was forced to admit to herself but still a might bit frustrating. She wanted him to kiss her already, but

she could not exactly be upset with him for taking his time when he kept making comments like that.

"I missed you too," she replied. "The girls discussed this drama on the Wizing Wireless, and I, unfortunately, did not have a Neville to help keep me sane."

"There are dramas on the Wizing Wireless?" Harry asked thickly.

"Yeah, and they're horrible. You know the type of story where there are these characters who are in love but different circumstances always spring forward at the most inopportune moments to keep them apart," she explained. "And then there is rampant cheating and affairs going on between all the characters at every turn as well."

"Oh, you mean like a Soap Opera?" Harry asked.

Ginny scrunched her face in thought as she tried to place what he was talking about when it hit her. "No. There's no singing or fat ladies or anything like that."

Harry let out a hearty guffaw, leaving Ginny confused. She could have sworn that was what an opera was; she had learned it in Muggle Studies. "No," Harry managed to say in-between bellows of laughter. "Not an opera; a soap opera. It's a type of show that appears on the telly in the Muggle world. It's the same kind of basic story line."

"Oh," she replied, embarrassed at her mistake. "Well why's it called a soap opera then if it's not anything like an opera?"

Harry shrugged. "I dunno," he replied. "That's just what it's called."

"Well they could make things a bit easier on me if they'd stick to giving things names that make sense," she grumbled good-naturedly.

"I'll be sure to let them know," he teased.

"Well good then," she said, following it up a moment later with, "Prat".

Harry just smirked his reply. There was a moment of silence as the conversation died away, and she found her mind wandering back to the almost kiss she had shared with Harry at the end of the ball.

"Well," Harry spoke into the silence, interrupting her thoughts. "Should we get started?"

She blew out a breath. "I suppose so," she replied dully.

"You don't have to do this, you know," he said. "If you don't want to we can..."

"No," she interrupted. "It's not that. I'm just nervous about it."

"That's understandable," Harry soothed. "I don't really know what to tell you. When I first started my lessons with Snape, they were far from pleasant, and by the time I began with Dumbledore, I was already pretty good at it. I think Dumbledore's approach would have been far less unpleasant from the start, but I cannot say so with any certainty. All I can say is that I'll try to be gentle. If I hurt you or you're bothered in any way, we can stop at any time."

"Thank you, Harry," Ginny responded gratefully. He had not by any means completely allayed her worries, but it was reassuring to know that he would do his best to make it as comfortable for her as possible. To know that all she needed to do was ask and he would stop was rather reassuring as well.

She gathered up her nerves and sat up straight in her chair. "Alright, I'm ready."

Harry smiled encouragingly, and she had to concentrate to keep her mind on the task at hand. "Okay. Close your eyes and imagine the inside of your mind. Right now there are no walls, just open space. Now I want you to imagine that you've built a wall around it, a strong wall, impenetrable."

Ginny did as she was told. She conjured up a physical representation of her mind and imagined a wall springing up around it, keeping her safe and protecting her from attacks.

"Do you have your wall in place?" Harry asked after a pause. She nodded. "Okay, keep the wall locked around your mind, and open your eyes." She did and found Harry across from her, looking at her intently. Had she found anyone else looking at her in such a way upon opening her eyes, she probably would have been unnerved and more than a little scared. "Now, I need you to keep eye contact with me. It should help as far as getting the Legilimency to work properly."

She nodded, meeting his eyes straight on. "Okay."

"Are you ready?" he asked her softly.

She inclined her head slightly, never losing contact with Harry's eyes. She heard a whispered "Legilimens" escape Harry's lips just before she felt a foreign presence in her mind. She could feel the presence just outside the walls she had just recently constructed. She wondered if the walls would hold up. What would he see if the walls came down? She was about to find out.

She felt Harry suddenly burst through the wall and enter into her mind proper. She could see memories playing in the back of her mind. She was at lunch earlier that day. As her friends chatted on about their cheesy drama, she glanced over at Harry to find him sharing a laugh with Neville over Ron and Hermione. The scene faded away, only to be replaced by one she had been thinking about quite a bit lately, one she had been thinking about not ten minutes ago.

She was lying under the stars in the cold night air. She was warm despite the fact that she was clad only in her dress robes. Harry was leaning forward, and she could feel her heart flutter as she closed her eyes and leaned forward to meet him. She felt as if her heart would burst in that moment, when she heard Harry's cry of agony and her eyes shot back open.

She felt Harry's presence leave abruptly and came back to her senses to find her eyes were closed; only she did not remember ever closing them. She sat frozen in her chair, afraid to open her eyes and find Harry staring at her once again. Had he seen the memory? Of course he had. That was what Legilimency did, allowed you to read

someone's mind. She wanted to scream out in frustration. Why did it have to be that memory? It was supposed to be locked up.

Even with her eyes closed, she could feel Harry's eyes on her. What would he say? Would he go on as if nothing had happened? Just when she had resolved to give him more time to make up his own mind, this had to go and happen and ruin everything. She felt like she was eleven years old all over again and had just dipped her elbow in the butter dish. She had long ago promised never to let herself feel that way again, and she had worked hard to get over her feelings for Harry to avoid another situation like it. Then she had to fall for him again and let this happen. She wished the ground would just open up and swallow her whole.

OoOoO

Harry was more than a bit surprised. He had been able to perform Legilimency on his first attempt. He had broken into Ginny's mind and had witnessed two of Ginny's memories - not only witnessed them but felt an echo of her feelings during the moments. He had unknowingly made her smile at lunch; she had been happy to see him laughing.

Then the same memory he had been dwelling on for weeks took its place. Experiencing it from her perspective, he could feel Ginny's emotions as he leaned in to kiss her. There was joy, but beyond that was desire. It was both surreal and flattering to feel her desire directed at him. He could not entirely hold off the red tint in his cheeks. Ginny Weasley wanted him.

Just before extracting himself from her mind, however, he had felt her mortification at what he was seeing and her uncertainty over where things lie between them. She was afraid that he had changed his mind. He could see that he was not the only one to have given the matter a lot of thought. While he had been debating what to do about his feelings, she was wondering what his feelings really were since he had been acting as if the near-kiss had never occurred. Had he continued to act in such a manner, she would have likely assumed that he had changed his mind or decided that it was a mistake.

He could not allow her doubts continue. If nothing else, he owed it to her to be honest and upfront about his feelings. He did not want her to feel for even a second that she was unwanted or unworthy. He focused on her, sitting in front of him. She had yet to open her eyes, and he sat there waiting for her to do so before he began. When, after a minute, her eyes remained clamped shut with her head downcast, he chose another course of action. "Ginny?" he asked tentatively.

He hated himself in that moment as he watched her. He could feel his heart constricting as she sat there in mortification, unsure of herself and of his feelings. He could not watch her suffer another moment, so he rose from his seat and kneeled down at her feet. Reaching a hand out, he lifted her chin up level to his own. "Ginny," he said again.

With an audible sigh, she opened her eyes, but they were still downcast. Harry hesitated for half a moment, with his hand still under her chin; he wanted to say something to alleviate her fears and to let her know how he felt about her, but he could not find the words. He felt frozen in place as his mind churned away searching for some way to tell her. Ever so slowly, Ginny's eyes finally began to rise until they met his gaze.

In that moment when their eyes met, Harry's thoughts ended abruptly. The room faded away, and all that was left was Ginny. He slid his hand down her jaw and rubbed the pad of his thumb against her cheek as he gently tilted her face and leaned in. The next fraction of a second seemed agonizingly slow as he closed the distance between them.

He could suddenly feel her warm, moist lips upon his, slightly parted. For a brief moment neither moved as their lips rested against each other. He felt Ginny sigh contentedly into his mouth, and the moment was broken. He began to move his lips and could feel hers moving in tandem. Her hand brushed across his cheek and settled at the back of his jaw with her fingers playing with the hair at the nape of his neck.

Harry could not begin to describe what he was feeling as he was kissing Ginny. He poured everything he was feeling into that kiss – all

the uncertainty and fear, and the desire and passion that he felt for her – and he could feel the same emotions radiating from Ginny.

The kiss did not last long. It was only several brief seconds later that they pulled back from each other. Their eyes met. No words were spoken nor were they necessary. Harry caressed the soft skin of her cheek with the pad of his thumb before leaning back in to give her a brief, lingering kiss on her lips.

As his lips pulled away from hers, he inclined his head forward slightly so that his forehead rested against hers. With his hand still lingering on her cheek and hers at the back of his neck, the two smiled into each other's eyes.

Just as Harry was about to open his mouth to try to explain his actions over the past couple weeks, Ginny pulled his head in for another kiss. Whereas their last kiss had been languid and sweet, this one was more needy and passionate. He could feel Ginny's lips moving against his with force and desire, and he was only too happy to match it. Her one hand gripped the hair on the back of his head as her other travelled around to his back. Harry slid one of his own hands into Ginny's hair, running the hair through his fingers as his lips continued to move against hers.

They broke apart after a minute, both breathing heavily. Harry leaned forward to rest his head in her lap, wrapping his arms around her back, as he regained his breath. Ginny's hand returned to his head, gently running her fingers through his hair as they sat there. Harry could have remained that way for the rest of the evening, but he had some things to get off his chest. Ginny deserved an explanation, first and foremost, for his behaviour over the last few weeks, but she also needed to know exactly what she was getting into in becoming involved with Harry.

And so, Harry forced himself up off her lap and sat on the back of his heels as he continued to kneel before her. "I think we need to talk," he told her with a slight, goofy smile still on his face.

She nodded her head in agreement.

"I'm sorry I've been such an inconsiderate prat these past few weeks," he told her sincerely.

"It's okay, Harry," she interjected. "I understand."

"No, it's not okay," he answered back. "I didn't once stop to think about how you were feeling or what you must be thinking. I was confused and scared and didn't know what to do about it." He blew out a deep breath before continuing. "I like you, Ginny. That doesn't even begin to cover it. You're my best friend, but you're also more. You're the most important person in my life. I think about you all the time. I've thought about the night of the ball constantly over the past few weeks. I can't stop thinking about it, or you. You have no idea how many times I've wanted to just pick up where we left off and kiss you."

He scratched the back of his neck nervously as he felt heat rush to his cheeks at his admission. "But at the same time I've been hesitant to do anything about it - for several reasons, really. The first and most obvious is the danger it would put you in if it became known that we were together." He held up his hand to pre-empt the interruption that was about to fly from her mouth. "I know it's stupid; you don't have to tell me. I was able to figure that one out myself. What I've really been worried about is what would happen to us if things didn't work out. I mean, you're my best friend. You're the only one who knows what I'm capable of and what I've really been doing since June. We spend so much time together, working out in the morning, training, and just eating meals together or hanging out either in my office or the common room. Our friendship is still so new, and yet I can't imagine my life without you in it. If things didn't work out and I lost you as a friend...I..."

He drifted off, unable to put to words exactly what that would do to him.

"Shh," Ginny said, sliding off her chair onto her knees in front of him. She reached forward and grasped both of his hands in hers. "Don't you think I've been worried about those same things? It's okay to have fears, Harry. But you can't let those fears control you, and I

won't let mine control me. I want this, Harry, and if you want it too, then don't let your fears hold you back. We'll just take things slowly, so we don't get in over our heads. If we decide we were better off just as friends, then at least we'll know. If we don't at least give this a shot, we'll always wonder what could have been."

"You're right," Harry said, squeezing her hands. "I know you're right, but there's so much you don't know about, things I need to do. Is it fair to you to drag you through all that with me?"

"Why don't you let me decide that?" she replied, squeezing his hands a little more firmly than was necessary.

"Because there are things I can't tell you – not yet," he retorted, pulling his hands from hers to run them through his hair in frustration. "Not until you've learned..."

"Occlumency," she finished for him. She was quiet for a brief moment, her eyes unfocused. Her hands moved to rest on his knees and her eyes locked onto his as she calmly continued, "So we take it slow. I'll continue training, and you can tell me when you think I'm ready."

He smiled then. All his fears and all his worries had been laid aside. She did not know all of what he had to do, but she had an idea and knew that there were many things he could not tell her. Yet she wanted him anyway. He felt lighter, as if a huge weight had just been lifted off his chest.

Some things were well worth the risk.

OoOoO

It was by unspoken agreement that the two did not share the news of the change in their relationship. When they returned to the Gryffindor common room later that afternoon, they acted as normal. The only indication that anything had changed between them were the secretive smiles they shared when no one else was looking. They were already accustomed to spending a large amount of time

together, so sitting next to one another on a sofa in front of the fire was in no way out of the ordinary.

Ginny pulled out her Transfiguration textbook to get started on an essay, while Harry began reading the book Hermione had given him for Christmas. Ginny had turned her back against the armrest with her knees pulled up to write against. Her toes burrowed their way underneath Harry's robes. When he turned to look at her she simply said, "My toes are cold."

Harry smiled in reply and turned back to his book. He was very interested to find out if the book would provide him with anything he might be able to add into his training or even his HA classes. The book did not focus on any martial art styles in particular but rather covered the over-arching concepts behind most martial arts.

The book talked about such simple things as the proper way to walk, keeping your centre of gravity in a position so as not to hinder your movement at any given moment and minimizing the amount of energy used in just the simple action. It outlined techniques to improve flexibility and agility. It also detailed the proper way to fall so as to minimize the impact on the body.

Harry found himself captivated by the book, and yet at the same time he found it difficult to keep his mind and, more importantly, his eyes on the book. Instead, he found both frequently wondering to the beautiful witch beside him. They shared many small smiles as they whiled away the time until dinner, and he hardly realised any time had passed when Ginny nudged his shoulder, breaking his fragile concentration completely. "Good book?" Ginny asked softly.

"Yeah, it's interesting," he replied, mentally marking down the page number he was on as he shut the book. "Did you finish your essay?"

"Almost," she answered. "It's time for dinner."

"Oh." He had not realised so much time had past. "Shall we head down then?"

She smiled her reply, and the two headed down to the Great Hall for the meal. The rest of the evening passed by without fanfare. When it was time to say goodnight, both Harry and Ginny were a bit reluctant. They had not let each other out of their sights since the kisses in Harry's office, save for trips to the bathroom, and neither was eager to leave the other.

They eventually managed to drag themselves up to the stairs leading to their respective dormitories. Mindful of the eyes of the others in the room, they kept their goodbyes brief. Harry longed to kiss Ginny goodnight but was unwilling to give up the secret of their relationship. What he could not say with his lips, he said with his eyes and his hand as he reached out to squeeze hers lightly. "Goodnight, Ginny," he said softly, his voice thick with emotion.

"Goodnight, Harry," Ginny parroted back. She smiled then as she turned and walked up her stairs. Harry watched her back for just a second before turning and ascending his own staircase. After sorting his memories of the day – another one ending up among his other Patronus memories – he lay in bed thinking over the day and, more specifically, Ginny. He was unsure why he wanted to keep their relationship secret. A part of him wanted to announce it to the whole world, yet he was reluctant.

After repeatedly baring the scrutiny of the Wizarding World, Harry was loathe to do anything that would put him in the centre of attention, even for something that made him happy. Their relationship was something the two of them shared together. It was not anyone else's business, and he preferred to keep it that way, at least for the time being. He would be lying to himself if he did not admit that there was a small part of him that wanted to keep it secret for Ginny's sake. He would never forgive himself if she were targeted because of him.

He shook those thoughts from his mind; it would not do to dwell on fears. His worries would not prevent him from being happy. A smile stretched across his lips as his thoughts wandered back to Ginny, and he found he could not wait until morning when he would see her again. It was with those thoughts that he drifted off to a blissful sleep.

OoOoO

Harry could not help the smirk that was affixed across his lips as Sirius came into view. Now he could finally tell somebody about Ginny.

“Alright, what’s got you grinning like an idiot?” Sirius greeted inquisitively.

Harry’s smile widened in response.

“Wait a minute,” Sirius said rather seriously. “I know that smile. You bloody-well did it, didn’t you?” A broad grin suffused his face. “I’d bet anything on it. You snogged Ginny, didn’t you? Prongs wore that same stupid grin the first time he kissed Lils.”

He could feel the skin of his face stretching in ways it never had before as he kept his silence.

“Well don’t leave me hanging here,” Sirius said. “What happened? How was it?”

“Brilliant,” Harry replied with a touch of awe in his voice. “It was brilliant. We were just starting her first Occlumency lesson, and I managed to break into her mind. I saw a memory of lunch that day, but then it shifted to her memory of the time we almost kissed on Christmas. I realised then what I was putting her through by not acting on my feelings. She was left wondering whether or not I had changed my mind. She was unsure of how I felt for her. I knew I had to tell her.”

“Hurry up and get to the good part,” Sirius whinged good-naturedly.

“I’m getting there,” Harry retorted with a roll of his eyes. “Now where was I before I was so rudely interrupted?” Harry caught Sirius rolling his eyes right back at him. “I was trying to think of the words to say to let her know how I felt, but my mind went blank. And then her eyes met mine, and I just kissed her,” Harry said, his voice containing a touch of wonder.

Sirius's grin returned in full force. "That's my boy," he said, clubbing Harry on the shoulder.

Harry could not help but smile in reply. As single-minded as Sirius was being at the moment, he had kissed Ginny. And he anticipated being able to kiss her again in the future. That was plenty reason to celebrate.

"It's about bloody time, too," Sirius continued, slightly exasperated. "I was starting to think I wouldn't be around to see the day."

That comment caught Harry's attention.

"You were really worried about that, weren't you?" Harry asked his godfather, the grin falling from his face. He knew Sirius felt his time was running out. Harry had not forgotten, but he hoped that since Sirius had not brought it up that he might have more time than he had originally thought. He felt his stomach tighten as he waited for Sirius to reply.

"Yes," Sirius admitted, his voice tired and strained. "Every day I feel the pull grow stronger. I worried that my leaving you would only delay things with Ginny, and I didn't want to see that happen. You'll need her more than ever once I'm gone."

Harry felt a lump form in his throat. He tried to swallow, but it was too thick to manage. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment to stem the tears he could feel accumulating in the corners of his eyes.

"Now that I know you're well taken care of," Sirius continued, his eyes growing the slightest bit misty, "I can go in peace."

"I don't want you to go," Harry blurted out, his voice cracking with emotion. He felt stupid for saying it; he knew that there was nothing that could be done to stop it. Sirius was dead, but no matter how many times he told himself that, it made no difference. He was closer to Sirius now than he had ever been while his godfather was alive, and now Sirius would be passing on to the other side for good.

“I know, Harry,” Sirius responded, reaching out and gripping Harry’s shoulders. “If I could, I would see you through the trials that face you. I wish I could be there with you every step of the way, but my time has passed. It’s time for others to fill that role for you. Let them, Harry. Let Ginny. Let your friends and Remus. No matter how strong you are, you’ll always be stronger with your friends.”

Harry stepped forward and threw his arms around his godfather. He recognised the gravity of what was being said and what it truly meant. Sirius knew his time was up and that he could be passing on to the other side any day now, and he was preparing for it.

OoOoO

Harry woke up early the next morning. The sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon, creating a dazzling array of colours in the sky. He sat peering out the window in his dormitory for some time, thinking. There was a lot to think about. On the one hand, he was thrilled with what was happening with Ginny. He could not wait to see her that morning. On the other hand, however, he was devastated at the thought of losing Sirius again. He had no idea it was even possible to feel so elated and dismal at the same time. It was a horrible feeling, not knowing whether or not he would see Sirius again that night. All he could do was hope for at least another night with his godfather, and if he got it, he would just make sure he made the most of it.

As the sun began to rise into view, he threw on his workout clothes and descended the stairs to the common room to wait for Ginny. It was about five minutes later when he heard footsteps descending the stairs.

Ginny slowly trudged her way down the stairs. She was dressed in her baggy sweats, hair tied up in a pony tail. She was still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as she entered the room. “I still don’t see why we have to get up so early every morning,” she grumbled sleepily.

Harry could not help but smile at her. He met her at the bottom of the stairs, leaned in, and gave her a swift kiss on her lips. “You’re cute when you’re grumpy in the mornings.”

Ginny lost her tired frown as a smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "I must look cute every morning then," she teased.

Harry's smile widened. "You do. Now come on," he said, grabbing her hand and tugging her towards the portrait hole.

OoOoO

Ginny was sitting on the sofa in Harry's office with her back against the armrest and her knees pulled up. On her knees was an open book that was failing to capture her attention. Instead, she stared over the book at Harry. He was sitting at the opposite end of the sofa, staring out at nothing – and he had been since about a minute after they had sat down. She felt her heart clutching as she watched him. All day he had been so closed off, and she could not figure out what was wrong. She had woken up feeling so wonderful, looking forward to the day and to seeing Harry again – to kissing Harry again. She did not know exactly what she expected of Harry, but she thought he would have at least been happy. Instead, he looked miserable, and he seemed to avoid going anywhere near the topic of whatever it was that was bothering him.

Finally, she decided she had had enough of her guessing game. "Harry, what's wrong?" Ginny asked, her voice soft and comforting.

Harry sighed; he sounded tired and withdrawn as he replied, "Nothing."

"Not nothing," Ginny persisted. "You're not..." she blew out a breath. "You're not having second thoughts about...us, are you?" There; she had said it – the thought that had been niggling at her brain the entire day. It terrified her to think that he might reject her. It had been like a dream come true to find out that he felt the same way as she. It would be a cruel trick to have that torn from her after only a day.

Harry's head spun towards her, his eyes wide and meeting hers for probably the first time that day. "What? No! How could you think that?"

“Well what am I supposed to think?” Ginny asked, struggling to keep her voice steady and calm.

“It’s got nothing to do with you. I’m happy with us; happier than I’ve ever been,” Harry told her, reaching out and grabbing her hand, squeezing it comfortingly.

“You don’t look happy,” she insisted, her lips slightly pouting.

Harry smiled at her and leaned forward to capture her lips in a soft kiss. “Trust me; I am,” he whispered with their lips just a centimetre apart, causing them to lightly brush together as he spoke. She sighed in relief, her fears dispelled. She was still worried about Harry, but at least she knew he was not having second thoughts. He leaned back then, pausing for a moment. “You remember when I said there was a lot I couldn’t tell you yet?”

“This is one of them,” Ginny replied sullenly.

“I want to tell you,” Harry said. “I just can’t – not yet.”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Ginny said, reaching forward to grab Harry’s hand and interlacing their fingers. She brought their hands up to her lips and kissed the back of Harry’s hand.

“It’s not,” Harry spoke after a moment. “But thank you for lying to me.”

Ginny smiled at him. “Any time,” she teased. She held the back of his hand up against her cheek and looked deep into his eyes. “I know there are things you have to keep secret from me, but it is okay to let me help you. I hate seeing you like this, Harry. And I hate feeling closed off from you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and she could hear the sincerity in his voice. “I didn’t mean to make you worry or to push you away, but I don’t know what to do about it.”

Ginny closed the book and put it on the ground as she dropped one of her legs off the side of the sofa and onto the floor and stretched the other one across the back of the sofa. "Come here," she said softly, padding the cushion in front of her. His eyes looked into hers for a moment before he complied. He sat in front of her with his back to the back of the couch. Ginny sighed, and then grabbed his shoulders and turned him so that his back was to her. She wrapped her arms around his middle and pulled him back against her. His head came to rest in the crook of her neck, and she looked down into his face, his eyes staring up at her. She brought one hand up to caress his cheek. "How's that?" she asked.

He smiled then – a true, genuine smile – and it warmed her heart. He inhaled deeply before responding, "Much better." They were quiet for a moment. Ginny's hand slid down to his chest, while her other hand was now holding one of Harry's. After a couple minutes, Harry squeezed her hand gently and said, "Ginny?"

"Hmm?" she asked, looking down into his face.

"I – thank you," he said, his voice thick.

She smiled down on him. "You're welcome, Harry."

OoOoO

Sirius felt his heart lurch; Harry had just been pulled forcefully away from him, and that could only mean one thing. What made matters worse was that he had just finished telling Harry that he was fairly certain this would be their last night together. As if Voldemort had not done enough to Harry, he had just stolen away their chance to say goodbye and spend their last moments together for hopefully a very long time.

Now Sirius was alone, wondering what to do with his last night connected to the world of the living. He worried about Harry, of course, but knew there was nothing he could do to comfort him now. He trusted Ginny to take care of Harry.

Making the decision to visit Harry had not been a terribly difficult one. It was clear that Harry needed him, and after not being there for Harry while he was growing up, Sirius was not about to fail Harry yet again – not when he could do something to help it.

Harry was not the only person he had considered visiting, however. There was one other he had thought of many times but had never been able to bring himself to follow through with it. He was afraid doing so would bring more harm than good, only making it harder to move past his death. But passing up the chance to say goodbye was asking a lot – too much.

OoOoO

Ginny was awoken by her alarm and groggily rolled out of bed. She threw on her sweats, tied her hair back, and blearily walked down the stairs into the common room. As she descended the last step, she let her eyes rake across the room. It was an odd occurrence not to have Harry ready and waiting for her. In fact, only once before had he not been ready with a greeting the moment she entered the room.

Her eyes swept the room once again, more alert this time, and she noticed a still form sitting in front of a window off to her left. She walked over and stood beside the chair, slightly behind him. She reached out and placed her hand lightly on his shoulder. Harry's head turned to look at her hand, and then his eyes travelled up her arm until he met her eyes.

What she saw in those eyes did nothing to comfort her. They were swirling with pain and loss and emptiness; she was nearly overcome with the intensity of it. After a long moment, Harry dropped his eyes and tilted his head to rest his cheek on her hand. That he was actively seeking comfort from her did not bode well, though she could not fight the rush of pleasure she felt that it was she he sought it from.

“What's wrong, Harry?” she asked.

He did not answer but lifted his head back up to stare out the window again. She set herself on the arm of the chair and reached her hand out to rub against his cheek. He leaned into her touch, but his gaze

remained fixed on the landscape beyond the window – his mouth closed.

Ginny let her hand wander from his cheek to his hair where she proceeded to run her fingers as she pondered over what to do. A vision seemed the most likely cause of his behaviour. It must have been a bad one since the last had not had a very noticeable effect on him.

Deciding for boldness, she let herself slide off the arm of the chair and into Harry's lap. His hands immediately flew to her hips, and his attention finally diverted away from the window. She looked up into his face from in his lap and said, "Hi."

"Hi," he responded, his eyes affixed to hers.

Ginny smiled softly at him as her hand resumed its previous action running through his hair.

After a minute, Harry asked, "What are you doing?"

"Playing with your hair," Ginny replied matter-of-factly, smiling impishly into Harry's eyes. She was daring him to react, to call her on her actions - daring him to do anything, really. As long as it got him out of his morose thoughts, she would be satisfied.

"And sitting in my lap," Harry added.

"And sitting in your lap," she agreed, keeping her voice cheerful.

"Why?" His voice sounded neutral, as if he was simply curious about her reasoning.

"Looked comfortable," she answered simply. Harry's lips formed an "Oh", causing Ginny's smile to widen.

"Is it?"

“Very,” she whispered silkily. Her eyes were drawn downward as she caught the bob in Harry’s Adam’s apple. She revelled in the effect she had on him as his cheeks began to burn a light shade of red. “Are you comfortable?” she asked sweetly, looking up at him from underneath her eyelashes.

She watched as he swallowed thickly. His eyes met hers for a brief second, but he was unable to meet her gaze. He settled for looking at the top of her head as he answered, “Er – yeah.”

“I’m glad,” she responded smilingly. “I’ll just stay right here then – since we’re both quite comfortable.”

“R – right,” Harry eloquently replied.

She tucked her head into his shoulder and leaned in to give him a soft, lingering kiss on the pulse point of his neck. She smiled to herself as she both heard and felt Harry’s sharp intake of breath. His hands had also jerked slightly from where they rested on her hips. She rested her forehead against his neck and felt Harry’s hand leave her hips and wrap around her waist. She closed her eyes as she enjoyed the closeness she felt to Harry in that moment.

OoOoO

Harry looked down at the sleeping girl in his lap wondering just how he had gotten into this situation – not that he was complaining. Under different circumstances he knew having Ginny in his lap would have a much more pronounced effect on him, but right now he was quite comfortable. He was content merely sitting there with her, even if she was asleep. Just having her warm presence there comforted him in a way he could not even begin to fathom, let alone explain.

But they were rather exposed in the Gryffindor common room. It was still early, but he did not want to give anyone the opportunity to catch the two of them in such a position. He managed to crane his neck around to see the staircases and twisted his right hand in their direction. It would have been easier to manage with his left, but Ginny was currently using his left shoulder as a pillow.

He cast a low-level privacy charm at each staircase that would alert him if somebody was approaching. He cast another one on the portrait hole. Satisfied, he settled back into the chair. His left hand was resting at Ginny's waist, and he let his right hand fall to her knee. He turned his face down to give her a kiss on the top of her head.

He was lucky, he knew, to have Ginny in his life. She was exactly what he needed, and he never even knew it. Without her, he would likely have been utterly miserable by this point; instead, he considered himself to be quite lucky. He had not expected to have anyone with whom he could share his secrets this term - no one to whom he could turn for comfort. He had planned on being very much alone – in a castle full of students. Making the decision not to tell Ron and Hermione about his training had not been easy. As hard as it was for him to sit idly and watch the two of them drift away from him, he knew he had only done what was necessary.

It had never even entered his mind to tell Ginny. Even if it had, he would not have even considered it. At the time, he did not know Ginny all that well. He had only recently looked past her role as Ron's little sister to see her for the person she was, and their friendship was still rather new and tentative at that point.

And now here he sat with Ginny asleep in his lap – lucky, indeed. He knew she was worried about him; he was worried about himself. Sirius had been the one constant in Harry's life since his training began last summer, but he was gone for good now. Just admitting that caused Harry's stomach to tighten. He was not sure how he would handle it. If he was completely honest with himself, he knew a lot of it would come down to the woman slumbering in his lap.

That was another thing. She knew something was seriously wrong with him, and it was not fair to her to keep her in the dark about it. Besides, how could he expect her to help him if she did not even know what was wrong? When he thought about it, he realised that it was not something that really needed to be kept secret. People might question his sanity over it, but it would do nothing to endanger any of his plans if others were to find out about it. Ginny was already privy to far more dangerous information.

He looked back down to her and gave her another kiss on her head. He would tell her later. For now he would let her sleep.

Later came soon enough. Ginny woke up after about another half an hour – still a good hour before breakfast would be served. He felt her eyelashes flutter against the skin of his neck and could not help the shiver that went down his spine. Ginny made a tired whimper as she attempted to burrow further into him. Harry laughed softly.

Ginny grumbled, “Sh’tup.”

“Good morning to you too, Gin,” Harry greeted.

“Mmm,” Ginny groaned. “I fell asleep?”

“Yes, you fell asleep,” Harry chuckled.

“How long?”

Harry paused as he considered, “Maybe forty-five minutes.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?” she asked into his neck.

“You looked comfortable,” he cheekily replied.

“I was – am,” Ginny confessed. “You still should have woken me.”

Harry shifted a bit – as much as he could without upsetting or upending Ginny. “I kind of liked it,” he admitted. “It was nice just having you here with me, even asleep.” He gave her another kiss on the top of her head, earning himself a kiss on his neck. “And besides,” he added almost as an afterthought, “you were much too cute to disturb.”

“Prat,” she said grouchily, though the effect fell short as he could feel and hear her smiling, even if he could not see it.

“Come on, Sleepy,” Harry said after a moment. “Let’s go down to my office. I have something I want to tell you.”

Ginny practically popped out of his lap at his pronouncement. Harry shook his head at her as he rose onto his feet. Ginny grabbed his hand and yanked him towards the portrait hole. “Easy,” he lightly scolded.

She only smiled at him as she continued to tug. Harry dug his heels in and walked at a leisurely pace, just to spite her. She turned and glared at him. “Move it, Potter,” she demanded.

Harry cocked his brow and looked at her expectantly, enjoying the little game.

“I’m not carrying you, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said saucily.

Harry laughed as he finally relented and began moving at his normal pace. It was not long before they were sitting together on the sofa in his office, Harry’s arm around Ginny’s shoulder. Harry blew out a breath as he considered how to broach the subject.

“What is it you wanted to tell me?” Ginny asked, all signs of her earlier playfulness gone.

He swallowed thickly as he steeled himself to talk about it. “Did you ever wonder how I was able to get over Sirius’s death last summer?” he asked. He could feel Ginny shift as she turned to look up into his face, but he continued staring straight ahead.

“I did wonder,” she admitted. “But the how wasn’t as important as the fact that you were okay and even happy.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah.” He paused. “I know this is going to sound strange, but I never fully came to terms with his death; I didn’t really have to.”

“What do you mean?” Ginny asked, her voice laced with both concern and curiosity.

“The way Sirius died,” Harry tried to explain, struggling to maintain his grip on his emotions, “was different than a normal death. The arch is a gateway to the afterlife. Once a soul passes through the arch, it can never come back out, but it’s not a true death. Sirius’s body was still intact, still alive. He was still loosely tied to this world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sirius visited me in my dreams,” Harry finally blurted out. He did not dare look down at Ginny, unsure of what her reaction would be. Would she think he was crazy?

He felt a hand caress his cheek, and he finally lowered his head to meet Ginny’s gaze. There was no accusation in her eyes, only compassion. “You’re sure...?” she began to ask.

“Yes,” Harry answered, his voice pleading with her to believe him, “I’m sure it was him. He taught me the Animagus potion and transformation, and he taught me how to Apparate. He trained with me every night over the summer.”

“I had wondered...” Ginny trailed off for a moment. “Your story about how Sirius began teaching you the Animagus process last Christmas never really seemed to add up, and I always wondered where you had learned to Apparate.”

“We didn’t start the Animagus training until this summer. Apparation came after I started having success with wandless magic,” he explained, his eyes searching her face to ascertain what she was thinking.

“And that explains how you were able to do so much in such a short span of time,” Ginny continued. “You were given several extra hours a night to train.”

“Yes,” Harry said sadly, “and I got a chance to really get to know Sirius. We spent nearly every night together from that moment on. A couple months back we stopped training every night because I was getting too good for him. He was only a couple years out of Hogwarts when he was sent to Azkaban, so he is not as advanced as you’d expect of someone his age.”

Ginny nodded her head in understanding and was quiet for a moment. Harry just watched her face as she took everything in. He could see the moment when it dawned on her what was wrong and why he had been so withdrawn. “He’s gone now?” she asked him in a tentative whisper.

Harry could only nod, unable to give voice to the words. He clamped his eyes shut as he could feel tears welling up in the corners of his eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” Ginny said to him, and he could hear the emotion bleeding out in her voice.

He squeezed her close to him, and her arms wrapped around his middle in return. She rubbed her hands comfortingly along his sides as they sat that way for a few minutes before Harry spoke again. “I know I should be grateful for the time we got to spend together, and I am. But it’s still so hard to accept that he’s really gone.”

“It’s okay to miss him, Harry,” Ginny said soothingly. “It’s normal and healthy. It would be unhealthy if you didn’t grieve him.”

“But he’s been dead since June,” Harry insisted, pain and frustration laced in every word. “I’ve known he was dead all this time. I just feel so stupid for not facing it sooner, for pretending like nothing was wrong.”

“It’s not stupid,” Ginny consoled, squeezing him gently. “How are you supposed to let someone go if you see them every night? Knowledge and acceptance are separate issues. Seeing Sirius every night, it would be impossible to accept that he was gone forever because he wasn’t gone yet, not entirely at any rate.”

“It would be like if someone you knew came down with an illness that you knew would kill them in six months,” Ginny continued. “You’d spend that six months knowing the friend was going to die soon, but that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t still hurt when he finally passed away.”

Harry nodded his head though she could not see it. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Well you’ve been a bit preoccupied,” she replied as if that should be obvious. “It’s understandable. That’s why it helps to talk about it. It can help you to gain perspective.”

“So I should talk to you about things like this more often, is that what you’re saying?” he asked as he finally began to relax his grip around her.

Her hands retreated from around his back as she backed up to look up into his face. One of her hands sought out his own while the other rose to wipe away the few stray tears clinging to his cheek. A gentle smile stretched across her lips as she answered, “Something like that, yeah.”

“Good advice,” he admitted with a small smile, turning his head to kiss her hand.

“I thought so,” she impishly replied.

OoOoO

That Thursday night was another full moon. Harry and Ginny snuck out of the castle again, Harry in his owl form and Ginny underneath his invisibility cloak. Harry was a little nervous as he walked in front of Ginny. He and Ginny had talked earlier in the week about their Marauder names, knowing that Remus would once again ask about them. The truth of the matter was, neither one of them could think of a decent name, nor was either inclined to keep trying. As much as Harry wanted to feel closer to his parents and Sirius, deep down he knew that was not the way.

He was too different from them; his life was too different. The Marauders were all about having fun and playing pranks, and while Harry enjoyed the occasional prank as well, he was focused on something entirely different: war. He spent the vast majority of his time training and did not have the time to devote to devising more than just the occasional devious and elaborate prank. Now that Ginny was also training for the war, she did not have much in the way of free time either.

In a small way, Harry was rather glad he would not have to break the news to Sirius. Now there was only one who they would need to break it to. Realistically, Harry knew that Remus would understand, but he still could not shake the feeling that he was somehow letting Remus – along with his dad and Sirius – down.

They arrived at the trap door leading up into the Shrieking Shack and, sure enough, were asked about their Marauder names not too long after. Taking a deep breath, Harry began his explanation of their decision, with Ginny at his side interjecting her support here and there. Remus remained silent throughout their diatribe, and Harry wondered what the man was thinking.

The room was silent for a long moment after Harry finished his explanation before Remus finally opened his mouth to respond. “I had wondered if you would come to that conclusion,” he said with a small smile. “As happy as it would make me to see you following in our footsteps, you have to be your own person. As great a Marauder as you would make, Harry – and you too, Ginny,” he said looking to each of them, “you would only be trying to be something you are not. Honestly, I’m proud of you for making this decision; it just goes to show how mature you are. Much too mature to be a true Marauder, I’m afraid,” he teased with a smirk.

Harry snorted his laughter, letting out a breath he had no idea he had been holding in the first place. He heard Ginny giggle beside him and looked over at her when he felt her hand squeeze his lightly.

“There now, what’s this?” Remus asked boisterously with his eyes locked on their joined hands. “Is there something else you two would like to share with me?”

Harry followed Remus’s gaze to their hands and slid his eyes up Ginny’s arm to her face, silently asking her permission. She nodded slightly, so Harry squeezed her hand as he turned back to Remus and said. “Let’s just say I followed my own advice,” Harry said around a wide smile.

Remus positively beamed at the two of them as he engulfed them both in a hug. “I’m so happy for you.” He let go of them after a moment, and as he took a step back asked, “How long has this been going on?”

“Since Saturday,” Ginny responded before Harry got the chance.

“Took your time following your own advice, I see,” Remus commented to Harry with one brow raised.

Harry narrowed his eyes at the werewolf. “You’re one to talk. How long did it take you to tell Tonks how you felt? Never mind the fact that you needed me to shove you in the right direction.”

“Touché.”

After a moment Harry spoke up again. “We haven’t exactly announced it to the world yet.”

“Or to anyone, for that matter,” Ginny interjected helpfully.

“So we’d appreciate it if you kept that bit of news to yourself for the time being,” Harry finished seamlessly.

“Please don’t tell me you two are turning into another Fred and George,” Remus gasped.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other, then back at Remus before all three burst out laughing. When they all calmed down, Remus stared

off into space above their heads for a moment before refocusing on them. "It's about time," he informed them. "You two had better change."

OoOoO

The rest of the night progressed normally for the trio of animals with some horseplay before they all settled down to sleep. Remus woke them early in the morning, and they were able to sneak back into the castle without fanfare. Rather than risk the oddity of sleeping in their beds in Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Ginny retired to Harry's office upon their return. Harry showed Ginny into his trunk and keyed her into it while he was at it. He gave her a very brief tour before he ushered Ginny into the bedroom with a goodnight kiss. Meanwhile he retired on the sofa and quickly fell into a light sleep.

They made it to breakfast on time, and no one was the wiser of their nocturnal activities. The day passed by as normal, leading into the weekend. Saturday evening found Harry enjoying his steak and kidney pie at dinner, his eyes wandering around the Great Hall. He was sitting with Ginny and her friends, who were all talking about rather girly things that he quickly found to be quite boring. This is how he found his attention wandering. He glanced down the Gryffindor table and could see Ron and Hermione heatedly arguing over something or another. Neville turned his head just then and Harry caught his eye. Neville rolled his eyes at their two friends to which Harry replied with a smile and a shrug.

His eyes continued to wander across the hall. They raked over the head table, and he noticed that one seat appeared conspicuously empty. His own head of house, Professor McGonagall, was absent. It was rare for most professors to miss a meal – save for the likes of Professor Trelawney or Professor Binns, but for Professor McGonagall to miss a meal was nearly unheard of. He wondered what could possibly be keeping the Deputy Headmistress from the meal.

A faint sound drew his attention to the ceiling of the Great Hall where he could see a single barnyard owl slowly descending in a circular pattern. The owl, which Harry recognised as being a school owl,

directed itself towards the centre of the Head Table. It was odd for an owl to appear during the evening meal. All owl post was supposed to be delivered in the morning. On top of that, it was exceedingly abnormal to see a school owl delivering post to the Headmaster.

He stared at the Headmaster as the man relieved the owl of its burden and offered it some meat off his plate. The Headmaster then slit the envelope with his knife and read the contents of the post.

If he had been hoping to glean any information on the contents from Dumbledore's facial reactions, he was to be disappointed. Harry did not expect to gain any information that way, however. Instead, he turned his attention to the owl that was preening itself in front of the Headmaster.

"Hello," Harry mentally called out to the owl.

The owl craned its neck around to locate Harry. Its eyes locked onto him. "Greetings."

"It's a strange sight to see an owl delivering post during the evening meal," Harry commented airily.

"This was a very special post," the owl responded smugly.

"The Headmaster must have great faith in you to trust you with something so important," Harry extolled. "You must be an exceptional owl."

Harry could practically feel the pride and the smug smile the owl held.

"I was wondering if you might do me a favour," Harry requested carefully.

The owl did not respond, but Harry could tell he had its attention.

"Do you know the contents of the post you just delivered?"

The owl's eyes once again locked onto his, and Harry got the distinct impression that it was trying to read his intentions through his eyes. He met its gaze head on, never once blinking or wavering in any manner.

"I wish to help the Headmaster, though he would not allow it, so I must do it in secret," Harry explained. "If it is something regarding the Death Eaters or Voldemort, I could be a great asset to the Headmaster and the Order."

"You value this information highly," the owl stated.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"What would you be willing to give up for it?" the owl asked.

Harry was a bit unnerved by the question, but what could an owl possibly ask for. Treats? "Ask anything of me," he responded.

"Your familiar, Hedwig, is a beautiful owl," the owl stated reverentially.

"No," Harry interrupted. "She is not mine to give."

"But you own her, do you not?" the owl insisted.

"Technically," Harry admitted. "But I would never hold her against her will, nor would I ask such a thing of her. She is free to do as she pleases."

"Very good," the owl replied. "I will help you."

The owl proceeded to tell Harry all he knew about the situation. Professor McGonagall had been waiting in the Headmaster's office for a floo call. The call came a short time ago, and she hastily penned the post that the owl had just delivered to the Headmaster. Professor Snape had reported that there was to be a small group of Death Eaters set to raid the home of Amelia Bones that night. She was the highest ranking Ministry official with an actual backbone and innate

sense of justice. She was the main obstacle to Fudge's corruption and incompetence.

The raid was to consist of five Death Eaters, all of them among Voldemort's inner circle. According to the owl, Harry had about an hour and a half before the raid was to commence which would not give him much time to locate her house.

The meal was ending about that time. Harry thanked the owl for all its help as he finally turned back to his present company. The girls were all still chattering amongst themselves except Ginny. She was watching him, curiosity evident in her gaze. He smiled at her and mouthed the word "office" to her. She nodded her understanding, and the two quickly exited the Great Hall after Ginny bid goodbye to her friends. Harry waved his goodbyes as well, and the two were off.

They did not speak at all on their trek. Harry spent the time thinking about how he would find Amelia Bones's house before the battle began and what to tell Ginny. He was aware of Ginny's gaze upon him intermittently throughout the walk, but it was not until the door to his office closed behind him that Ginny turned and asked, "What's going on?"

"There is going to be an attack tonight," Harry stated calmly.

"How do you know that?" Ginny asked sharply.

"I learned about it at dinner."

"How? And why were you staring at the Headmaster for so long?" Ginny inquired.

"I wasn't staring at the Headmaster," Harry responded.

"I was watching you, Harry," Ginny replied impatiently. "You were staring right at him for several minutes. It was like you were lost in your mind."

“I actually was not staring at him for very long, but something else,” Harry explained unhelpfully.

“If not him, what were you staring at?” Ginny demanded.

“The owl that delivered his post,” Harry responded, his voice still calm.

“What post? They don’t deliver post at dinner.”

“Not normally,” Harry conceded. “But this was a very important letter.”

“How do you know that?” Ginny asked again, visibly deflating before him.

“The owl told me.”

“Ha ha,” Ginny said, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

“I can talk to owls,” Harry maintained. “I learned that this summer shortly after I managed the transformation. I talked with Hedwig.”

She looked at him sharply, her eyes boring into his. “You’re serious.”

“Yes,” he replied simply. “I eventually learned how to speak to them even in human form. I was able to convince the owl to share the contents of the letter with me.”

“What did it say?”

“Basically that there would be a Death Eater raid at Amelia Bones’s home tonight,” Harry explained. “I have less than an hour to figure out where she lives.”

“You’re going.” Ginny stated with dread.

“Yes,” Harry responded softly.

Her fear and worry flicked plainly across her face before she nodded her acceptance, though it was clear she was not happy with the situation. "Be careful."

"I will," Harry said tenderly as he reached forward to cup her cheek. "I'll come back to you."

"Promise?"

"I promise," Harry said. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. She threw her arms around him and opened her mouth to him hungrily. Their lips moved together. Her arms roamed around his back, pulling his body against hers, and his arms wrapped around her reflexively. One hand buried itself in her hair, while the other traced lines down her back. Harry had never in all his life felt the passion that was pouring out of Ginny in that one kiss. It was overpowering, intoxicating. He lost himself in that moment. When their lips finally broke apart, he rested his forehead against hers, breathing deeply, raggedly, as he struggled to regain his bearings.

"Wow," he whispered, his eyes flicking up to meet hers.

"There's plenty more where that came from," Ginny stated in a husky whisper. "So long as you keep that promise."

As he leaned his head back to look into her face more clearly, Harry could only nod his head in agreement, unable to think of the words to form a proper response.

Ginny took a step back from him, her arms leaving his back. He was loathe to let her go, but he dropped his arms from her as well. She adjusted her robes for a moment, and Harry simply watched her. Once she was satisfied, she looked back up at him and asked, "So how do you plan to find out where she lives?"

Harry shook his head to clear it and wake his mind back up. "I'm not sure," he answered after a moment. "Is there an address book for the wizarding world? Would they have something like that in the library?"

“I’ve never heard of anything like that,” Ginny responded, shaking her head. “They probably have something like that at the Ministry, but...”

“Bugger!” Harry exclaimed. “I was counting on that.” He began pacing back and forth as he racked his brain for another solution.

“Well, you could always ask Susan,” Ginny suggested as she perched on the arm of the sofa. “I think Amelia Bones is her aunt. She should know where her aunt lives.”

Harry stopped his pacing and spun around to face her. “I’d rather not let anyone else in on what I know if I can help it,” he said. “But if push comes to shove, that will probably work.” Just then an idea struck him. “I’ve got it!”

“What?” Ginny asked.

“My owl form.”

“What?” Ginny repeated in confusion, rising back to her feet.

Harry turned towards her and found her confusion written as clearly on her face as it was in her voice, and he realised he had never shared that bit of information with her. “You know how owls can sense where people are when delivering a letter?”

She nodded.

“Well, when I change into an owl, I can do that too,” he explained. “I first figured it out when delivering your birthday present. I used that when delivering your letter to your mum as well.”

“Oh,” she said, her mouth remaining agape for several seconds. “Wait, she probably lives in England; are you going to fly all the way across Scotland?”

“Good point,” Harry conceded. “I’ll just Apparate into England and hope that I’m not too far away.”

“I guess so,” she agreed.

“Which means I should probably get out of here right away,” Harry stated.

“Yeah,” she nodded, her eyes downcast.

A heavy silence stretched between them as they both knew it was time to say goodbye. Harry was unsure what to say. What comforts could he possibly give her? What could he say to allay her worries?

“You had better get going,” Ginny told him softly.

“Yeah,” Harry replied thickly.

She slowly walked towards him. “Be careful out there.”

Harry opened his arms to her, and as she stepped into his embrace, his arms wrapped around her back, holding her tightly against him, tucking his head into her shoulder. He inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of her hair. After a long moment, he relaxed his grip slightly and leaned back to take a good look at her. Her eyes were glistening. As a solitary tear escaped her control and travelled down her cheek, Harry removed his right hand from her back and wiped the tear away with the pad of his thumb – at the same time cupping her cheek.

She leaned into his touch and turned her head to kiss the palm of his hand. Harry wondered how such a simple gesture could have such an effect on him. He turned her head back towards him and leaned in to capture her lips with his. The kiss was slow, completely different from the hungry, passion-filled kiss they had shared earlier, and yet there was just as much emotion exchanged. This was not lustful or hungry; this was something more – something much better.

She broke the kiss after a long minute, and rested her head against his chest. No words were exchanged. They just stood there for a

moment in their embrace. Finally, Ginny pulled her head back. "You should go."

Harry nodded and gave her one last squeeze before letting go. "Thank you, Ginny."

She nodded but did not respond verbally. Harry gave her a sad smile as he turned and walked to the door. "You should go out first. I'll follow in my invisibility cloak," he said.

She nodded again. Harry dug the cloak out and put it on. He watched as Ginny schooled her features and proceeded out the door. He followed closely after her and moved out of the way so she could close the door. He stood and watched her walk away in the direction of the common room until she had turned the corner and was out of sight.

He crept up to the Owlery hidden from sight. When he got there, he transformed into an owl and took off out the window. He flew to his usual spot outside of Hogsmeade. When he landed, he reverted to human form. He stuck the invisibility cloak and his robes into his trunk. His slacks were already a dark colour. He stripped out of his shirt and chose a form-fitting black t-shirt instead. It was a bit cold for it, but a simple warming charm alleviated him of that bother. By the time he dug his contacts out, he had already changed his hair colour and length and hidden his scar. He put in his brown contacts and then stored his trunk back into his pocket.

He Apparated first to Diagon Alley and ducked into an alley to transform into an owl. He could immediately tell that she was far away. He changed back and Apparated to King's Cross station – still too far. He racked his brain for other options before Apparating as far off the Burrow property as he could remember being. Frustrated again, he chose a place he had once promised himself he would never return to. He appeared a moment later in his bedroom in Number Four Privet Drive. She was closer here than she had been at any other location, and Harry was running out of ideas, so he decided to set off from there.

He did not linger but immediately launched himself out the window. He flew high into the air and regained his bearings. He began flying westward, soaring high above the cookie-cutter houses of his former neighbourhood. With any luck he would never have to return there.

As he followed his owl sense, Harry began mulling over strategy. Should he make contact with the Order members and hope they would accept his help? Would they trust him? He was pretty sure he could get Kingsley or Minerva to agree to his help, if they were there, but the others had never seen him in this form before. Would they even have heard about him? Would they know he was on their side?

He could wait until the battle began to get involved which would remove the choice from their hands. But there was always the possibility they would attack first and ask questions later. If he chose that route, he would have to quickly prove he was on their side.

He pondered over what his best option would be, but as he drew near his destination, Harry found that the decision was not his to make. The Death Eaters were early, and they brought friends. From his vantage there looked to be approximately twenty Death Eaters surrounding the building. The Order members were camped around the house and hidden from plain sight, but Harry was able to catch glimpses of them. He estimated there were only five or six total.

Harry circled the house once to get a better look. Remus and Tonks were behind the house, separated by a good ten or fifteen metres. Dedalus Diggle was in the bushes on one side of the house. Hestia Jones claimed the other side. In front of the house were two wizards Harry did not recognise.

Tonks and Remus were the only ones he really knew. They would be the easiest to convince to cooperate with him. First, he would give them a show of good faith. He circled back behind their attackers. They were well positioned on top of a small hill with several large rocks for cover. None of the spells Remus or Tonks were sending stood any chance against them.

On the other hand, Remus and Tonks both found themselves in precarious positions. There were eight Death Eaters with wands

trained on the two of them, and they lacked the cover of their opponents. Taking out their attackers would be difficult. They were spread out enough that he would only be able to eliminate two at most before the others were alerted of his presence. That still left six Death Eaters to dispatch. It was more than he preferred to have to deal with at one time, but he had handled worse.

He circled over the Death Eaters once more, deciding the best targets for his initial strike. He could not distinguish between their skill levels based on their actions. There was no clear leader or superior among them. There were two cloaked figures relatively close to each other, which would make it easier on him to eliminate the two foes at once.

Deciding on this course of action, Harry began his descent behind the line of Death Eaters. He landed well behind the two of them as quietly as he could. He hesitated a moment to make sure they were not alerted to his presence. When they made no reaction, he reverted to human form and immediately conjured his fake wand into hand. Wary of being seen, he resolved to avoid using his second hand if possible.

He very quickly sent out two silent Everberos with his right hand. The two targets fell but not before they had made sufficient noise to alert their comrades. Harry was just gearing up to charge his next target when he felt something. He instinctually ducked and rolled out of the way. A green spell flew through the space he had occupied only moments before. Harry's eyes scanned the area behind him but saw nothing.

His attention was diverted as two Death Eaters attempted to flank him on each side. He turned and fired off a Stunner at one of the figures, but before he could send a second spell, the earlier feeling overtook him, and Harry rolled away. Another spell zoomed past where he had just been standing – again from behind. There was somebody there. They were either Disillusioned and standing perfectly still, or they were under an invisibility cloak. Either way, this did not bode well for Harry.

Knowing that he was in danger in the position he was in, Harry decided his best course of action would be to stay mobile. If he stood

still, it would give his attackers, both visible and invisible, a chance to strike him. He also knew that his invisible attacker would find it difficult to move quickly without revealing his position.

So as Harry sprang out of his roll, he sprinted to his right. The action caught the Death Eater on that side by surprise, and the man was unprepared for the Blasting Hex Harry shot at him. He was lifted bodily off the ground and flung several metres through the air. Harry glanced over after he had impacted the ground and noted that the man was not moving. Another one down.

He came upon another Death Eater who had been firing hexes at Remus which kept the werewolf pinned down. Harry had made too much noise, however, and the cloaked figure rose and fired a hex in his direction. Harry dove forward underneath the spell and rolled into a somersault. He sprang up less than a metre in front of the Death Eater and dropped his fake wand as his fist shot up in an uppercut under the man's jaw. Harry felt a jolt of magic shoot through his arm just as his fist made contact, and the Death Eater was thrown back a metre and rolled over face down. He did not move again, but Harry paid him no attention as he dove behind the nearby rock the recently downed Death Eater had been using for cover.

Three green lights shot past him, and Harry knew he had to do something to even out the odds. He had been lucky so far. He should have been killed more than once already. He had charged in overestimating his own abilities and underestimating his enemies. He needed to find a way to dispatch his invisible foe first and foremost. He remembered his HA class when Snape had tried to sneak in undetected. A simple Accio had done the trick that time. Could it possibly work again here?

Harry conjured another fake wand in his hand and concentrated on the silvery material of his own invisibility cloak. He imagined the cloak wrapped around a figure cloaked in Death Eater garb. When he had the image firmly locked in his mind, he peeked his head above the rock and thrust his wand hand forward, casting Accio in his mind.

He heard a voice shout and saw his target. The figure was holding onto the cloak to prevent it from being Summoned, but as he

struggled with it, part of his body was showing. Harry vaulted the rock and charged the man. He cast the Summoning Charm again with his left hand as he used his right to hurl three Stunners at his target.

The man swore as he ceased his attempts to hold onto the cloak and hastily put up a shield. He managed to get the shield up just in time. Harry cursed inwardly, but at least his target was no longer hidden from sight. The invisibility cloak flew towards Harry, and he caught it in his left hand. Thinking quickly, Harry performed a Banishing Charm on it, sending the cloak towards Remus. He hoped it would reach his friend and that he would put it to good use.

“You’ll give back that cloak if you know what’s good for you,” the harsh voice of the man cut through the cool, night air.

Not looking to mince words with a Death Eater and not wanting to waste any time, Harry ignored the lame threat and prepared for the coming duel. He saw two Death Eaters edging around his right side, attempting to flank him. Harry considered his options for a moment. He did not like how exposed he was at the moment. He had revealed his invisible foe, but there could be others as well. He needed to dispatch his opponents quickly so he could resume his guerrilla tactics.

Harry wanted to dispose of his formerly invisible foe first. The man had already proven himself apt in his abilities, blocking all three of Harry’s Stunners on a hastily constructed shield. And it was likely that the superior Death Eater would be given the privilege of the invisibility cloak. He let his two other foes continue to edge around him as in doing so they were putting further distance between themselves and their other comrade.

After a moment Harry sprang into action, sprinting towards the solitary foe. The man began throwing curses at Harry, which he skilfully dodged. The only curse he identified of the bunch was Lacerus, the Cutting Curse. He thought he recognised the purple haze of one of the spells, but he could not place it, nor did he have the time to give it any thought.

He rapidly closed the distance between them until they were only a few metres apart. He cast Stupefy twice and Frangosus, the Blasting Hex, as he dove aside to avoid the green light of the Killing Curse. The man was quick with his shields and once again had no trouble blocking all three spells. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see the other two Death Eaters begin to trot towards them, and he knew that if he wanted to maintain his advantage, he would need to act quickly.

He cast an Incinerating Hex at the bottom of the man's cloak, catching the fabric on fire. Before he had any chance to respond, Harry shot to his feet, rapidly casting low powered hexes at the man to hold his attention and prevent him from putting the fire out. The man danced on his feet as the heat of the fire began to burn his legs. He attempted to stamp the cloak out as he held his shield in place, but the fire was spreading up his robes too quickly.

Harry edged around the man to put him between himself and his other two enemies. Unable to take the heat any longer, the man dropped his shield to douse the flames. Harry quickly put him out of commission with an Everbero. Harry stepped over the man's prone form to face his other two foes. He erected a shield to block a Stunner sent from one of the men as he side-stepped an unfamiliar curse from the other.

Another feeling overtook Harry, and he instinctively rolled to the side, turning himself around in the process. A green light passed through the space he had formerly filled and struck one of the two Death Eaters he had been facing. The man crumpled to the earth, dead. Unfortunately for Harry, he had rolled directly into the path of another curse. This one was a very deep red with a sickly orange tint to it. Unable to get out of the way in time, he threw up the strongest shield he could manage, hoping it would be enough.

The spell impacted at his chest just as he felt the shield spreading across his body. The shield was able to mute the effects of the curse, but the curse was too powerful to be blocked. Harry felt his breath leave him, and his chest seared in scalding pain. He looked down at his front and saw that his shirt had been torn asunder by the curse, and the skin beneath looked raw. Worse than the sight of his chest

was the stench of charred flesh that filled his nostrils. Unable to do anything about it at the moment, Harry continued his roll and re-emerged on his feet, wincing from the pain.

As he rose, he cast a Blasting Hex at his other foe, who, having gone over to check on his fallen comrade, was unprepared for the spell. Harry turned back towards the direction of the spell that had struck him in the chest and scanned the area for any attackers. Unable to see anything, Harry tried casting the Summoning Charm again, hoping it would work again. Nothing happened.

Harry slowly spun around in a circle to fully take in his surroundings. As he came around full circle, he found two hexes flying in his direction. He dropped to the ground on top of his chest to let both spells fly over his head and winced at the pain as his raw skin impacted the cold, hard earth. He still could not see his attackers, but now he knew there were two, both likely invisible.

An idea quickly formed in his head. The grass was a bit long where he was lying, so he cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself as he created an illusion of himself just directly in front of him. He was counting on the dark of the night to aid him. In broad daylight, the Death Eaters would most likely be able to see right through the illusion, but since it was so dark, they might just fall for the trick. He directed the illusion to stand as he continued to lie on the ground. He had the illusion turn his back to his attackers and walk several paces away. He smirked as two, then four spells flew at the illusion.

He had the illusion duck behind a rock and out of sight before having the head pop back up to hold the attention of his invisible foes. Now that he knew the rough location of each attacker, he needed to devise a plan to dispose of them. He needed to act quickly before they had a chance to reposition themselves.

Unable to come up with a better plan, Harry sprang to his feet and charged the nearest target, firing curses as he sprinted. His aim was true, and his foe was forced to erect a shield to block the hexes. Harry was able to keep the Death Eater in his sights with each spell that impacted the shield. He was unable to cast the spells with the rapidity he would have liked due to the fact that he was running full

speed at the time. This gave his target the chance to cast a couple spells in between Harry's barrage.

Harry was forced into evasive manoeuvring by those spells and the ones coming from his other invisible foe. When Harry was close enough, he positioned himself such that it made it difficult for the second attacker to get a shot off without hitting the other Death Eater. He and his target traded spells from a few metres away. Every time the second attacker repositioned himself to get a better shot at him, Harry would just edge around his target to once again put him between himself and the second attacker.

It was quickly becoming clear to Harry that he would not be able to win this duel by fighting straight-forwardly. No matter how much power he put behind his spells, they were unable to penetrate the shield of his target. Meanwhile, he was beginning to tire, and the pain in his chest was slowing down his movements. Every way his body turned seemed to stretch the raw skin, causing it to burn painfully. The pain was making it difficult for Harry to get a full breath of air.

Harry eyed a fist sized rock on the ground a bit beyond his target. He made a show of casting several, rapid low-level hexes at his target to keep his attention as he levitated the rock with his left hand and hurled it into the back of where he imagined the man's head to be. The rock seemed to just skim the man's head, but it was enough to distract his attention and allow Harry to hit him with an Everbero.

He ducked out of the way just in time to avoid a deep red curse that looked suspiciously like the one he had been hit with earlier. He spun around to locate the second attacker when he saw a light erupt from nowhere before his eyes. Harry had to catch his instinctual reaction as the spell was not directed at him, but at a spot some fifteen metres away. He saw the spell connect with an invisible obstacle and heard the thump as a body fell to the ground.

Remus's head appeared suddenly from the source of the light. "I'm a friend," he called out to Harry.

Harry nodded at Remus and walked over to his fallen foe, collecting the man's invisibility cloak. When he turned, Remus had already

uncovered the other Death Eater and had presumably pocketed the man's cloak. "Thanks," Harry said in a raspy voice, careful to alter his voice enough so that Remus would not recognise it. He knew he had to be careful in how he dealt with Remus. Harry could not let on that he knew him or was in any way familiar with him or anyone else in the Order.

"There's no need to thank me; it's I who should be thanking you," Remus replied in a kindly whisper, his nose twitching slightly as he drew closer to Harry.

Now that there was a moment of calm, the pain in his chest seemed to momentarily overwhelm him. Harry went down to one knee and took a deep, shaky breath.

"Are you alright?" Remus asked in concern.

"I'll...be fine," Harry responded.

Remus knelt down beside him. "Your chest looks pretty bad," he commented. "Did you catch what the spell was?"

Harry shook his head. "No." He tried to take a deep breath but was unable and winced at the action. "No, I just barely saw it. It was a deep red, with an orange tint to it."

"Hmm," the man pondered. "If I had to guess, I'd say that's the Devil's Fire, but it doesn't look as serious."

"I got a shield up...just before it hit me," Harry supplied.

"Ah," Remus said. "You're lucky, then. Had the full curse hit you, we probably wouldn't be speaking right now."

"What's going on with the others?" Harry asked, trying to block out the pain.

"I don't know," Remus said. "My partner and I saw the commotion you made up on the hill, but we couldn't get out of our position to help

you. That is, until an invisibility cloak landed right in my lap. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Harry smiled, but it turned into a wince as he tried to stand up.

"Easy," Remus said, springing onto his feet and giving Harry a hand up. "I have a portkey that can take you to a hospital."

"Portkey!" Harry exclaimed. "I almost forgot. Accio portkeys," he intoned, holding his fake wand aloft. Harry watched the body in front of him, but nothing happened. "That's strange," Harry said. Harry turned towards the body Remus had knocked out, wincing as he did so, and tried the spell again. Again, nothing happened.

"We really ought to get your chest looked at," Remus said.

"I'll be fine," Harry insisted. "We can go as soon as we check on the others."

Remus seemed to consider this for a moment. "All right. Come on then."

"Flip your hood up," Harry told him. "Listen for me and stay close. Let's not give ourselves away until we need to."

Remus nodded before he slipped the hood back over his head. Harry began to slowly creep back towards the house. After several paces he whispered, "You still with me."

"Yes," Remus whispered back. "I have sensitive hearing; I can hear you breathing just fine."

Harry almost wanted to smirk. Of course, Remus also gained some benefits from his monthly transformation, though they were a far cry from outweighing the bad. He continued his slow trek until he came up to the crest of the hill where he had first appeared.

Tonks was still being held against the house. There were two Death Eaters relatively close together to their left, and one lone Death Eater

to their right all firing curses at Tonks, preventing her from making any sort of progress.

“You take the one on the right,” Harry whispered. “I’ll handle the two on the left.”

“No,” Remus whispered back fervently. “You’re injured. Take the one on the right. I can handle the two on the left.”

Harry rolled his eyes beneath his cloak, but he did not feel like standing there arguing with the man. “Fine. We’ll meet back by your friend.”

“Right,” Remus replied.

The two split up. Harry rounded out his path to come up behind his foe. He knew he was invisible, but did not want to risk being detected beforehand. When he drew close to the man, he concentrated on his breathing to avoid making any unnecessary noise. When he was just over five metres away, he stunned the man. Remembering one of his first rules – and cursing himself for forgetting to do this with his other victims – Harry summoned the man’s wand and snapped it in two.

With that done, he turned back towards the house. He saw two lights flash on a far hill and then nothing. He assumed Remus had accomplished his task and began walking towards Tonks. Remus arrived first, his disembodied head seeming to float in midair. The two embraced for a moment, then Remus turned in Harry’s direction expectantly.

When Harry was about fifteen metres away, he removed the hood of the cloak and revealed his head to the two of them.

“Who’s that?” Tonks asked.

“He’s the one who saved our arses,” Remus replied. “And took a nasty curse doing it.”

“Pleasure,” Harry said, a bit sarcastically.

“At any rate,” Remus continued. “He’s a friend, or an ally at the very least.”

“We haven’t got time for pleasantries right now,” Harry said. “When I arrived, I spotted around twenty Death Eaters scattered around the house. I also managed to discover there are some Death Eaters roaming around in invisibility cloaks as well. I managed to take out seven of the original twenty I saw.” He turned to Remus, “Did you get any besides the two you just downed?”

“Just one,” Remus replied. “Plus the one under the invisibility cloak.”

Harry nodded his head. “Right, that makes ten of the twenty I saw. But there may have been more I didn’t see. And we dispatched three invisible ones total.” Harry thought over the situation for a moment. “There are supposed to be five members of the inner circle here. My guess is those are the ones in the cloaks, which would leave us with two more cloaked, plus at least ten more besides.”

Tonks was staring at him wide eyed as he relayed the statistics of the battle thus far. “You took down nine Death Eaters by yourself?” she asked.

Harry looked at her with an intense gaze, but he did not respond.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“A friend,” was all Harry replied.

When Tonks looked ready to demand more, Remus reached out and gripped her shoulder. When she turned, Remus shook his head. “Not now,” the man said. “I trust him, and besides, we need his help.”

Her shoulders sagged in defeat, but she hardly seemed pleased with the situation.

“If you’re finished,” Harry spoke again, “we need to come up with a plan before your friends are overpowered.”

“Do you have that third cloak?” Harry asked Remus.

The man nodded and dug the silvery fabric out of his robes.

“Right, give that to the lady then,” Harry directed. “I think we should split up and try to eliminate as many as we can without being spotted. The two invisible Death Eaters are still out there, so be on your guard. If we can take enough of them out of the fight quickly, your friends should be freed up to actually help us out.”

Tonks shook her head vehemently. “I think we should stick together. It’s the first thing they teach us in Auror training, to stick with your team in an unknown situation. There is power in numbers.”

“We can get more accomplished if we split up,” Harry insisted, shaking his head. “We stick together and we’re liable to give away our position away after taking down only one Death Eater.” He paused as he took a shaky breath. “If we split up, we’ll cause more confusion and can get more accomplished in a short amount of time.”

“Or we’ll get picked off one by one,” Tonks interjected.

“He’s right, Tonks,” Remus said soothingly. “With our invisibility cloaks, we have an advantage. We waste that advantage by sticking together. Three small invisible targets will be more effective than one large invisible target.”

“Fine,” Tonks bit out. She grabbed the cloak out of Remus’s hand and threw it over her shoulders. “But if you get yourself hurt, old man...”

Remus pulled Tonks into a rough embrace and kissed the top of her head. Harry turned away, feeling like he was intruding on a very private moment that he should not be privy to. After a moment, Remus cleared his throat, and Harry turned back around.

“Ready?” Remus asked.

Harry nodded. "I'll go around this way," Harry said, indicating the direction he had come from. "You two go around the other way. Pick different initial targets, and don't stay too close."

"But you're..."

"I'm fine," Harry interrupted. "It's just a little burn. It's nothing. Now go." He flipped the hood back over his head and began his trek around the house. He felt bad for being so cold to the two of them, but he had to maintain his façade. They were strangers. He had no reason to go out of his way to be nice to them. And besides, this was hardly the time for making friendly.

When he reached the edge of the house, he slowed down and was careful not to make too much noise. There were no hills to aid the Death Eaters on the side or front of the house, but there were scattered trees and rocks they could use for cover. The closest Death Eater he could make out was still about thirty or forty metres from his position. Harry did not know what happened to Diggle, who had been on this side of the house when he had arrived, but he hoped the man had regrouped in front of the house with his comrades because the side of the house was vacant.

Harry walked quickly across the lawn, putting some distance between himself and the house to allow him to approach his target from behind.

Careful not to make too much noise, Harry snuck up behind his first target and stopped a few metres away. As he sent a stunner at the Death Eater, he turned around and ducked down. He turned around in a circle looking for any reaction to the spell he had just cast, but he could not see anything. Turning back to his target, he once again checked for portkeys with no results, then destroyed the Death Eater's wand.

He cautiously moved to his next target. He again stunned the man and immediately ducked down, scanning the area. There was again no reaction. He began to grow a little worried. He looked across to the other side of the front yard and saw one of the Death Eaters get struck down from behind. There was no reaction on that end either.

Harry had a bad feeling. If Snape had really been correct about the five Death Eaters from the inner circle, which was no guarantee considering all that he had been wrong about, then that left two other most likely invisible foes who were unaccounted for.

He kept a wary eye as he continued to make his way around the lawn, incapacitating two more Death Eaters. As he looked up to his next target, he saw that one of the others had beaten him to the punch. There was no way the other two invisible foes could be oblivious to their presence now. They had to be up to something, but what he was not sure.

Remus's head appeared fifteen metres in front of the front door, followed shortly by Tonks. The other Order members all came forward to meet him. Harry kept his invisibility cloak on as he cautiously walked towards the group. From a distance he realised there was one missing from their ranks, and he determined that Diggle was not among them.

Harry was slowly walking towards the group of Order members when he saw what appeared to be an argument being waged among them. Remus was arguing heatedly with the two men stationed in front of the house. Harry could not make out what was being said until Remus finally blurted out, "Then let it be on your heads!"

The two men looked to each other after that before turning as one to the house and waving their wands in intricate patterns. Harry could feel a rush wash over him as the wards were dropped.

Not a moment later, the front door burst open and Amelia Bones stormed out ranting, "I demand to know what is going on. Why did you lock me in the house? Why..."

And then it hit Harry – why the other two invisible Death Eaters had not shown themselves prior to now. His hands were already rising as he saw two shots of green light emerge from either side of the woman. Without consciously thinking about it, Harry sent a burst of magic at Amelia, pushing her back into the house. With his left hand he sent a Blasting Hex towards the source of one of the spells.

He followed that spell up with a Stunner to ensure the man was incapacitated. He heard Remus's voice shout something but was unable to make out the words. As he saw the first of his spells connect with an invisible barrier, he turned his attention towards where the second killing curse had originated. He saw a red spell connect with the Death Eater and watched as the figure fell, causing the invisibility cloak to slip partially off his body.

"Shit," he yelled in frustration, whipping the hood off his head as he turned to face the Order members.

Three wands were trained on him before Remus stepped in front of him. "He's a friend," Remus stated.

The three cast him dubious looks but dutifully lowered their wands.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Harry shouted as he stepped past Remus, wincing at the pain in his chest as he did so. "Why would you pull down the wards? You didn't even check the perimeter."

The two men responsible for taking down the wards shared another look before one of them answered in an even voice. "No more Death Eaters were attacking, so we assumed..."

"Your assumption almost got her killed!" Harry interrupted, gesturing towards the open door where Amelia Bones was once again emerging, though more cautiously this time around. "Just how incompetent are you?"

"Easy," Remus said in a calm voice from his side. "They made a mistake, and we will be covering that later." He glared in their direction as he said this, his voice hardening, before turning back to Harry and continuing in his soft tone. "Thank you, again, for all your help. Without you, we'd probably all be dead."

Harry's anger deflated as he turned towards Remus. "You're welcome," he said. He turned around and scanned for any signs of the fallen Death Eaters, but they were all gone. He tugged off the

invisibility cloak and bundled it up in his hands as he began jogging towards the location of the last Death Eater he had dispatched. He was forced to halt after only a few strides as the pain in his chest flared.

“Slow down there,” Remus said approaching him from behind. “Where are you running off to?”

“They’re gone,” Harry said looking over his shoulder at Remus. “All of them.” He turned back around and continued his trek at a slower pace. As he had suspected, there was no sign of the Death Eater save for the snapped wand several metres away. “I checked them all for portkeys. How did they...?” He trailed off, staring at the depressed grass where the Death Eater had been lying.

“I don’t know,” Remus said beside him.

“What are you two chatting about?” Tonks asked as she approached the two of them.

“The Death Eaters are all gone,” Remus replied, turning to face her.

Harry turned as well and saw her face fall. “All of them?”

The two men nodded their heads.

“Bugger.”

“Well, I thank you for the lovely evening and all,” Harry said, though his voice lacked the humour it was meant with. “But I think it’s time I got going.”

“Wait,” Remus said. “What about your chest?”

Harry winced at the thought, doubly so when he imagined what Ginny’s reaction would be. “I’ll be okay,” he said.

“Nonsense,” Remus insisted. “That needs to be treated - the sooner the better. You saved all our lives; the least we can do is help get you patched up.”

As much as Harry wanted the relief he knew they would be able to offer, it also meant going with them and possibly running into Dumbledore. He could not take that risk. Remus had given him an idea of what curse he had been hit with. He'd just have to look it up and search for any salves that might help.

“Thank you for the offer,” Harry said sincerely. “But I’m afraid I must decline.”

“Excuse me,” an authoritative voice rang out from several metres away. Madame Bones was striding towards the three of them. “Auror Tonks, Remus,” she greeted. “And...” she trailed off expectantly.

Harry’s brain scrambled quickly to reply, “You can call me Jim.” He could have almost smacked himself for using a name so similar to his father’s.

The woman cocked one eyebrow at him but nodded her head in acceptance. “Very well. I was told that I have you to thank for saving my life, so I thank you.”

Harry nodded as he replied, “You’re welcome.”

“Now I was also told that you are the senior member of your group,” she continued, turning towards Remus. “And I think I deserve an explanation.”

“Yes, you do,” Remus agreed.

“Well, this is where I take my leave,” Harry said. Turning to Remus and Tonks he continued, “I imagine we’ll meet again sometime.” He turned and nodded his head, “Madame Bones.”

With that, Harry Apparated back to his usual spot outside of Hogwarts and reluctantly returned to the castle. Ginny was going to skin him alive as soon as she saw his chest.

OoOoO

Remus was exhausted after the long and strenuous evening. He found out that an injured Diggle used his emergency portkey to escape the battle but passed away shortly after arriving. The one casualty hit him hard, though he knew they were lucky they escaped with just the one. He was sitting at the kitchen table of Number 12 Grimmauld Place with Tonks at his side. His left hand was intertwined with her right and resting atop her knee. They were listening as Snape finished giving his report, claiming that only the five members of the inner circle had been mentioned about the raid. He had been unaware that they were bringing others with them.

After Snape sat down, Dumbledore looked down the table and asked Remus for his report. Too tired, he opted to remain seated as he spoke. He recounted the events of the evening, starting with their arrival. They had set up the wards around Amelia's home, locking her in and everyone else out. They had barely had time to finish the wards and assume their positions around the house when the Death Eaters had appeared. They had been completely surrounded and unable to make any headway against their foes' superior positions and numbers.

Several minutes into the battle, he had seen two of the Death Eaters firing at him struck down from behind. He had been unable to see much, but he had been aware that a battle was taking place just beyond the hill. There had been a few Death Eaters holding him in position, preventing him from investigating or helping. He told of how the invisibility cloak had been dropped in his lap and how he had gone to help their mystery ally.

He then covered the rest of the events of the evening, including the mystery about the portkeys and how some rash decisions had nearly cost Amelia her life. Concluding his debrief, he slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. Tonks squeezed his hand comfortingly,

and he turned his head and opened his eyes to find her gazing at him in concern. He offered her a tired smile.

“You say he was alone?” Dumbledore questioned him.

Remus shifted his attention to his former Headmaster. “Yes.”

“Was there any indication that he may have had an accomplice nearby?”

Remus that for a moment before shaking his head. “No, I don’t think – unless...” he trailed off as a thought occurred to him.

“Yes?” Dumbledore prodded eagerly.

“Well, he did seem like he was in a big hurry to leave after the battle was over, repeatedly refusing my offer to help treat the burn on his chest. He seemed anxious about something. I suppose it’s possible he may have had a friend with him in the beginning. I think he was taken by surprise by the invisible Death Eaters. The friend may have been hurt early on, which would explain why he was so eager to leave.”

Dumbledore placed his elbows on the table and steeped his fingers underneath his chin as he pondered the situation. “That does seem plausible,” he said at length. “Have we made any headway in determining their identities?” he asked, turning to Minerva.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We have not found record of anyone age 17-30 who fits the description.”

Dumbledore nodded his head reservedly. “Let us review what we know about them. Minerva, if you would?”

His former Head of House nodded her head and stood to deliver her information. She started with a physical description of the young man she had seen. She asked for confirmation from those who had come face to face with him, and all agreed. She nodded her head in acceptance before continuing. “We think it likely that he works with

another, though we have yet to see physical evidence of this. It is also a possibility we could be dealing with identical twins.”

There was a gasp several seats down the table, and Remus turned his gaze to see Mrs. Weasley holding a hand over her mouth.

“I think it unlikely to be Messrs. Fred and George,” Dumbledore told her comfortingly. “Their demeanour is entirely different, and if they were indeed acting in disguise, it is unlikely they would disguise themselves as identical twins.”

“I agree,” Remus input. “I only taught your boys for a year, but the man I met tonight was much too serious to be either Fred or George. And besides, he was the wrong build entirely.”

She seemed mollified for at least the moment, so Minerva continued on. “We think it likely that this is the same young man who aided us during the attack in Hogsmeade and was responsible for Miss Weasley’s rescue in Diagon Alley over the summer. The descriptions match except for the hair, which Miss Weasley described as being the same colour but much longer. Assuming they are one in the same, he is an Animagus with the form of a black panther.”

Remus felt his heart stop in that instant. A black panther? Why did it have to be a black panther? Could it be a coincidence? His mind played back his interaction with the young man from earlier that evening looking for some sort of sign – anything that might point to Harry.

They were of a similar height and build. The most glaring differences were the hair, eyes, and lack of a scar, but with the appropriate glamour charms it was entirely possible. He had not acted like Harry. The Harry he knew was quiet, reserved and respectful. The young man had been forceful, bordering on impudent. He had handed out orders expecting them to be followed and berated the Order members for their nearly costly error.

But the panther Animagus form could not be ignored. There were not many known Animagi in the country. To have two people with

identical forms in such proximity was stretching the odds to the limit. It was beyond highly unlikely. But Harry was still underage, and the young man he had met today had used a lot of magic. Unless Harry managed to get his hands on another wand...

He was interrupted out of his musings by the hand squeezing his own. He turned his head to find Tonks watching him with concerned curiosity. He shook his head at her to stem off any questions. He needed to think about this long and hard. There was a lot at stake here: Harry's trust in him along with his concern for Harry's safety at the forefront.

His mind wandered back to a dream he had had exactly one week prior. It had been strangely realistic and had stuck with him quite vividly even after waking. It was not every night your dreams were visited by your deceased best friend, but what really struck Remus had been what Sirius had said to him.

"Hello Moony," a familiar voice greeted.

"Padfoot?" Remus asked incredulously. "Is that you?"

Sirius transformed into his Animagus form and back in a matter of a second. "What do you think?" he asked as if talking to a particularly dim-witted child.

Rather than answer, Remus stepped forward to embrace his friend.

"It's good to see you, Remus," Sirius said as he returned the hug. He released the embrace a few seconds later, brushing his robes down as if they were full of wrinkles. "I wanted to visit you sooner, but I couldn't quite bring myself to it."

"What do you mean?" Remus asked.

"That is a long story," Sirius replied. "Suffice it to say, I've been connected to this world since my death last June. Unfortunately, my time here is up."

“I don’t understand,” Remus protested in confusion.

“It’s alright; that’s not important,” Sirius replied, waving away his concerns. “I’ve come to talk to you about Harry.”

“Harry?” Remus asked in confusion.

“Yes, Harry,” Sirius responded, rolling his eyes. “You know, black hair, green eyes, used to wear glasses.”

“I know who Harry is,” he scoffed. “I just don’t understand what you mean.”

“That’s because I haven’t explained what I mean yet,” Sirius said, speaking slowly and enunciating each syllable with painful clarity.

Remus remained silent in anticipation.

“Better,” Sirius said. “I can’t tell you much, or Harry would hate me for it,” he stated. “Harry’s been training since June. Training hard, Remus. He’s incredible. I’ve never seen someone accomplish what he has in such a short span of time. His drive and determination are unmatched, and, by Merlin, is he powerful.”

“When the time comes, you have to trust him, Remus,” Sirius continued. “I know he is still so young, but don’t let his age cloud your vision the way it has Dumbledore’s and so many others’. He will be a part of this war whether you like it or not and trying to shield him from it will only serve to alienate you from his life. You can’t let that happen. Trust him, Remus...”

He shook his head to clear the apparition from his vision. Could that have been real? Could it be Harry?

A/N: Thus ends the chapter. For news, discussion, update notices, and the Teaserette Guessing Game visit my group site. You can find the link for it on my bio page.

Chapter 18: Skin Deep

Time may fly when you are having fun, but it dies when you are worried. Ginny was beyond worried. How long had he been gone now, thirty-five minutes?

She was too anxious and worried to concentrate on anything, and she could not bear to be around anyone else. She knew she would be too transparent to them, but more than that she just did not want to deal with people at the moment. She knew she was far too likely to fly off the handle at the simplest provocation, and she was also liable to interpret absolutely anything as a provocation.

She had absolutely nothing to help her pass the time except worrying and waiting. Waiting was not something Ginny Weasley liked to do. She realised that she was being a bit impatient, but she could not help how she felt. She had taken refuge in Harry's office; at least there she did not have to worry about keeping up appearances. She would sit down on the sofa, rise, pace back and forth in front of the fire, become frustrated with herself, plop down on the sofa, and repeat the process all over again. And so she waited.

She glanced at her watch. Forty-five minutes had passed since Harry left. "Ugh!" she cried, flinging herself off the sofa. She could not take it any more. She needed to do something, so she took her cue from Harry. Ginny flung the door of his office open and quickly traversed the corridors and staircases that led to the seventh floor corridor holding the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy. Impatiently pacing back and forth in front of the room, she tore open the door that appeared across from the portrait and slammed it shut behind her. Before the crash of the door had even reached her ears, Ginny's wand was in hand.

"Lacerus!" she shouted, cutting her wand across her body as she did so. A short jet of light erupted from her wand mid-slash and raced forward. She watched as it tore across the midsection of a dummy that had appeared several metres in front of her. She took grim satisfaction in seeing the curse sever the dummy in two. She was already spinning to face her next target and never saw the first disappear as soon as it hit the ground.

Incendiary, blasting, bludgeoning, and cutting curses were her preferred methods of relieving tension. Of all the curses she knew, those were the most openly brutal to their targets. At first her targets all remained motionless, taking her onslaught, but after a short time, they began moving and fighting back. Ginny found it was much more satisfying to destroy something capable of defending itself and even able to hex her in turn. The ones that slipped a jinx past her defences – all minor – did not remain standing long afterwards.

While she was busy blocking a spell from a dummy on her right, one managed to hit her with a particularly irritating Stinging Hex on her left side. She unthinkingly jabbed her left hand towards the offending dummy. When she dispatched the one to her right, she turned, intending to counter the attack from the left. She instead found the other dummy crumbling into ashes as flames consumed its body. No new dummies appeared as she watched in morbid fascination. She glanced down at her hand then back at the pile of ashes.

In that moment of calm, her adrenaline began to fade, and fatigue caught up with her. She had no idea how long she had been at it, nor could she remember how many dummies she had dispatched. Ginny stared down at her left hand for a long minute before her senses began to catch up with her. She noticed the grittiness of her hand first. The feeling of a drop of sweat tracing its way down the side of her face followed. She wiped the sweat away from her face with her sleeve before turning to find a door leading to a shower room, just the thing she needed.

She kept her mind clear as she allowed the steamy shower to relax both her mind and body. After the workout she had just given herself, the heat felt wonderful on her muscles. It offered her only a brief respite, however, as all too soon the reality of the situation caught up with her. She cut her shower shorter than she would have liked, wanting to get back to Harry's office so that she was sure not to miss him.

As soon as she arrived, she sank back onto Harry's sofa and closed her eyes, unconcerned at the prospect of falling asleep. Her mind was much too active to fall asleep at the moment, even if her body

was drained. She hoped Harry would not be much longer. The mock battle and subsequent shower had done a lot to ease her nerves, but she was still worried about him.

She refused to look at her watch as she waited. It seemed like hours before she heard footsteps outside the door. Her eyes snapped open and watched as the handle turned and the door seemed to open of its own accord. She was on her feet by the time the door clicked shut. As soon as Harry's feet came into view as he removed his invisibility cloak, she was crossing the room towards him.

When his face appeared and he turned to her, he held out his hand to stop her approach. She stopped short and was confused, hurt, and worried all at once by the simple gesture. Her emotions must have shown on her face because he answered the question in her mind.

"My chest was – er – cursed," he explained awkwardly.

"What do you mean cursed?" she demanded, feeling a cold pit of fear well up in her stomach. Her eyes quickly raked over his body seeking reassurance that he was okay.

He did not answer; instead, he grabbed hold of his robes and lifted them over his head.

She did not miss the wince of pain on his face at the action, nor could she withhold her gasp as the robe moved past his chest. His shirt was torn and singed, and she could see the raw, charred skin of his chest.

She took a couple steps towards him, closing the distance between them, and held out a hand as if to touch his chest but withdrew long before making contact. Her mind flew back to the dummy consumed in flames in the Room of Requirement. Then the scene changed. The flames never abated; only this time it was not a dummy, but Harry. She immediately shook that image from her mind, unnerved by the intensity of it.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his hand on her arm.

She opened eyes she had not realised she had closed to find Harry's face looking down on her in concern. She could almost have laughed at the irony of the situation – almost. "Yes, I'm fine," she replied in a hard tone. She looked deep into his eyes, and her voice softened as she continued, "The question is are you okay?"

He shrugged his response. "I'll survive," he said. "But right now my chest hurts like hell."

"At least you're learning to be honest," she answered, regaining the remainder of her composure. She wanted to hear about the battle but needed to make sure he was taken care of before she succumbed to her curiosity. "Do you know what you were hit with or how to treat it?"

"Remus said..."

"You talked to Remus?" Ginny interrupted in surprise.

"In disguise," Harry explained. "He was there tonight, and we ended up helping each other out a bit. He said he thought it might be a curse called the Devil's Fire, or something like that. I don't really know anything about it or how to treat it."

'Great!' Ginny fumed in her mind. Part of her wanted to rage at him for taking such risks and getting himself hurt like this, but she knew it would solve nothing. It was not even a rational anger. She was not angry at him. She was angry at the Death Eaters and the situation. He should not be forced to take such risks, but she saw the necessity of it. No one else was doing much of anything about it. After all, that was what she was training for, so she could take those same stupid risks with him.

She took a couple deep breaths to calm herself before reevaluating the situation. She silently thanked her mum for treating her differently than all her brothers, forcing her to learn things that a proper witch should know if she ever hoped to run a household. She knew Harry would refuse to go to a healer unless there were no other options

available, and that meant he would research the curse and any possible cures before he even considered it a viable option.

“Mum made me help her with a couple salves for Charlie when he was training before moving out to Romania,” Ginny told him. “I’m not sure how much it’ll help, but they’re pretty easy to make and don’t require anything outside our normal potion supplies.”

“That would be wonderful,” Harry told her with obvious relief. “How long will it take?”

Ginny shrugged. “About half an hour to make it, I think.”

Harry nodded and pulled his trunk out of his pocket, removing the shrinking charm from it. “There are supplies and extra cauldrons in the study. Take whatever you need.”

She nodded curtly at him and let herself into the trunk. He had already given her the tour, so she wasted no time heading for the study, quickly packing up all the supplies she would need. She ascended back into his office a couple minutes later to find Harry sprawled out on the sofa with his back flat on the cushions and his legs hanging over the arm of the sofa. He turned his head to look at her, and she offered him a small smile before making her way to his desk, setting up the cauldron, and preparing the ingredients.

“So tell me what happened,” Ginny said as she set off to work.

She heard Harry sigh behind her but did not let it distract her from her work. After a moment he began to speak. “Well, the Order was given false information. Or rather, they were given wholly incomplete information. There were five members of Voldemort’s inner circle present for the assault, as well as a good twenty other Death Eaters.”

She fumbled with the knife she was holding and nearly cut herself in the process. Twenty-five Death Eaters? Five from the inner circle? She turned around and looked at Harry, though he could not see her from the position he was in, and she silently thanked Merlin, the fates,

and whatever deity might be out there that Harry had walked away with just the burn on his chest, horrible as it was in its own right.

Harry continued on, seemingly oblivious to Ginny's reaction. "They were also a bit early. By the time I arrived, the battle was already underway. There were six Order members stationed around the house, and all six were pinned down. The Death Eaters had the superior position, and the Order members couldn't make any headway at all. I circled the grounds as an owl and counted twenty Death Eaters, along with the six Order members."

"Wait," Ginny interrupted, turning around to face him. "I thought you said there were twenty-five Death Eaters."

Harry moved as if to turn around to face her, but then winced at the action and spoke from his current position. "There were, but at the time I counted twenty. You'll see why in a minute."

She huffed and spun back around to resume working on the salve for Harry. After a short moment, he picked the story back up. He explained about the Death Eaters under the invisibility cloaks and how he was constantly being attacked from behind by the invisible foes. "Even after I discovered the invisible Death Eaters, it was impossible to keep track of them while fighting off all the others, which is how I ended up with this."

Ginny did not turn to face him, knowing that Harry was speaking of the burn on his chest. Given the story he was telling her, she knew he was lucky to be alive. The burn looked bad, but compared to the alternatives, she was thankful that was all he had suffered. She was glad that she had the salve to focus on as he told his story. It kept her from contemplating his words, from conjuring scenes in her mind of Harry fighting for his life while hopelessly outnumbered.

Instead, she concentrated on mashing this ingredient, or cutting up that one, stirring it into the mixture clockwise for three turns. It was not the most complicated process, but it was enough to hold her attention. The thought that it could help Harry kept her mind focused on the task at hand.

His story finished before she was done with the salve, and the room settled into silence broken only by the sounds of her labours. About five minutes later the salve was finished. She poured the ointment into a jar and walked over to the sofa, kneeling down on the floor in front of him.

“Hey,” she said softly, her eyes briefly pausing on his chest before rising to his face.

“Hi,” he responded. “All done?”

“Yep.” She held up the jar for him to see. “Now, first thing we have to do is get you out of that shirt.” She paused a moment before suggesting, “It may be easier just to cut it off.”

Harry’s head tilted down to look at his shirt, and he seemed to consider his options for a moment before he agreed. “The shirt’s ruined anyway,” he explained.

She nodded, then cast her gaze around the room looking for something to cut the shirt with. She nearly smacked herself on the forehead when she finally thought to reach for her wand. A simple severing charm would do the trick. She concentrated on cutting through the fabric without touching his skin; she was particularly careful on the areas near his burn. The last thing she wanted to do was make his injuries even worse.

When she was finished, she pulled the fabric down to his sides and allowed her eyes to rake across his stomach and torso. After a moment her eyes flicked up to his and found that he was watching her. She had to fight down her blush as she felt heat rushing to her face. Once she had control of herself, she reached her hand out and traced his skin just below part of his scorched flesh.

“There are some bits of your shirt stuck to your skin,” she said after a long moment. “We’ll have to remove those.” She looked up from his chest to his face. “It will probably hurt.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I’ve never exactly done this before. Mum never actually had me help her treat Charlie; I only helped make the salve. I’m as ignorant of what to do as you.”

Nodding his head in acceptance, Harry conjured a pair of tweezers and held them out to her. She took them and looked down to his chest wondering where she should start. His voice called her attention back to him.

“I’m going to cast a numbing charm over the area to dull the pain.” As he said this, his hand was already passing over his chest, and she saw a soft blue light pass over the affected area. She looked back up into his eyes once the light had disappeared. “Go ahead,” he encouraged.

She nodded her head and set to work. Even knowing that he should not be able to feel any pain, she still took great caution and care as she removed the bits of cloth fused to his burned skin. She did not want to damage the area any more than it already was, and she also knew that while he may not be able to feel it now, he likely would feel it later if she was too rough.

After several minutes she was finally satisfied and leaned back away from the sofa. She turned her torso and set the tweezers on the table behind her. When she turned back, she found Harry’s gaze resting on her. A small smile spread across his lips, and she somehow knew what he was trying to say. That smile conveyed his gratitude better than words ever could. She offered her own smile in return as she lifted the jar. “I think you’re finally ready for the good stuff,” she informed him. “Do you want the honours, or would you rather I do it?”

“If you don’t mind,” Harry answered without hesitation.

“Of course not,” Ginny replied. “If I can’t fight with you, at least I can take care of you when you come back.”

She dipped her right hand into the jar, scooping up a healthy amount of the ointment onto her fingers. She set the jar down and braced her

left hand on the sofa in front of him as she began to spread the salve across the burn. She was careful to keep her touch light and frequently looked up into his face to make sure he was alright. Every time she looked up, the corner of his lips would quirk up at her, and she would immediately focus back on the task at hand.

When she was satisfied, she sat back and looked around for something to wipe her hand on, but Harry solved the dilemma by conjuring a towel into his hand and offering it to her.

“Thanks,” she said. “I think you’re supposed to lie still for awhile to give it time to set in, but I’m not exactly sure how long.” She finished wiping off her hand and tossed the towel onto the table. Harry barely lifted his hand as he immediately vanished the object along with the tweezers. She stood and looked down at him. “You just stay there, and I’ll go clean up.”

It took her only a few minutes to clear away the mess on his desk. Once she had finished the task, she perched on the table before the sofa, leaning over with her elbows on her knees to put herself in his line of sight.

The two were quiet for some time. Against her will Ginny found her mind wandering back to his description of the night’s events. Her mind began conjuring images of Harry locked in battle. She was helpless as she watched him struggle for survival, as she watched the curse connect with his chest. His stubborn nobility kept him fighting even through the obvious pain he was in. So lost was she in her imagination that she nearly jumped off the table when Harry broke the silence. “Ginny?” he asked.

“Yes, Harry?” she answered after taking a moment to collect herself.

“Can you grab the invisibility cloak?” Harry requested.

“Sure,” she replied as she stood and retrieved the garment. As she sat back on the table, she held the cloak out to him.

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head slightly. “I want you to keep it.”

“What?” Ginny asked, her voice belying her surprise. “I couldn’t. It belonged to your dad; it’s yours.”

Harry chuckled lightly, then groaned and held a hand to his chest just to the side of his burn.

“Easy,” Ginny soothed. “You need to be careful while that’s healing.”

Harry nodded his head in acceptance before returning to the topic at hand. “That’s not my dad’s. I got that tonight, and I want you to have it.”

Her head tilted down to look at the cloak in her hands. She slid the silky material through her fingers and held it up for closer inspection. “This belonged to one of the Death Eaters?” she asked tentatively.

“Yeah. For all I know it may even have belonged to the man who gave me this?” He nodded down to his chest.

Ginny just stared at the fabric held between her fingers. Objectively she knew that she should accept the cloak and be thankful for it. Invisibility cloaks were rare and expensive; she never imagined she would ever own one. At the same time, she wondered if the garment would be a constant reminder to her of the dangers Harry was in, or how close he had come to being more seriously wounded. Resolute, she refused to let her worries and fears control her.

“Thanks,” she finally said softly. “Any more surprises for me?”

Harry seemed to think it over for a second before responding, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Good. I think I’ve had all I can handle for one night.”

Harry sighed wearily. “We should probably get up to Gryffindor Tower. We’re already late for curfew.”

Ginny cursed under her breath. "I hope Hermione's not waiting to ambush us."

Harry shrugged. "Not much we can do about it, but the longer we wait, the more likely she is to say something."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Of course," he replied with a cocky grin. He opened his trunk to the compartment holding his clothes and grabbed a clean, whole shirt and robe. "Er – do you think it's okay to wear something over this?" He gestured unnecessarily to his chest.

"I have no idea," Ginny replied with a shrug. "Not much choice either way, is there?"

"I suppose you're right." As he struggled to get the garment over his head without stretching his chest too much, Ginny stepped forward and helped him. It took a bit of work, but they were finally able to get his clothes looking normal. With that settled, they set out for Gryffindor Tower. Luckily, Hermione was engrossed in writing an essay and did not notice the hour when they arrived. They went straight to bed, each too exhausted to even contemplate doing any homework or even spending time with their friends in the common room.

OoOoO

Harry forced himself out of bed the following morning. His chest was still quite raw, and every movement served to punctuate the pain. He called forth his magic and felt a cool, numbness spread over the area. It was an odd feeling. Every breath felt strange, but he did his best to ignore those sensations. The charm made the pain almost unnoticeable, so he could deal with any oddities.

For once Ginny had beaten him to the common room and was forced to wait on him, though he was sure she had not been waiting too long. He had only taken a few extra minutes to get ready. The concern in

her eyes was evident from the moment her face swam into view, and he sent her a small smile hoping to allay her worries.

“Good morning,” he said as he stepped off the staircase and approached her. He leaned in to give her a quick peck on the side of her mouth. As he backed away, he saw the corner of her lips he had kissed quirk up into a soft smile.

“Good morning, Harry,” she responded in little more than a whisper. “How are you feeling?”

On any other day, the question would have seemed innocuous, but on this morn, the question was a loaded one. Part of him wished to tell her he was fine, that she should not be concerned, but he knew she would see through that fallacy. He could tell her that he was feeling just slightly better, or he could tell her the truth. “I had to cast a numbing charm.”

“I still wish you’d let a healer look at it,” she said in a defeated voice with her head down. She looked up and met his gaze as she asked, “Do you think it’s at least healing?”

Harry shrugged helplessly, wishing he had something positive to give to her. “It’s too soon to tell. I’ll continue to use the ointment for the next few nights, and hopefully we’ll know by then if it’s working.”

“Will you at least reconsider taking it easy for a few days?” she asked hopelessly. “You’re only going to aggravate it by staying mobile.”

“I promise I’ll take it easy, but I have to maintain appearances, which means the morning jog has to stay,” Harry responded patiently. “Now come on. Even if I don’t have to do a full workout today, you do, so we best get moving.”

She stuck her tongue out at him but did not argue; instead, she clasped her hand in his and walked at his side down the corridors of Hogwarts, into the entrance hall, and out into the grounds.

Harry was careful in his stretching routine, only doing the exercises that would not stretch his chest at all. When he began his jog, the discomfort was minimal, but as time passed on, he became more and more aware of the burn. The pain was never unbearable, though it made it difficult to get a full breath of air, which left him feeling unusually winded.

He slowed his pace to compensate. He was still outpacing Ginny at his reduced speed, but he was unwilling to push himself as hard as he normally would. He was frustrated with the situation, but he knew it was unwise to risk causing himself more harm.

OoOoO

Remus was exhausted. As if the battle and meetings the previous night had not been long enough, he had slept fitfully, unable to relax his mind. He had spent hours tossing and turning in bed as he struggled with the information he had learned and what it all potentially amounted to. It was almost inconceivable to think that Harry and their mysterious saviour could be one in the same, yet he could not deny the evidence.

The panther animagus form was just too much to be coincidence. Add in the fact that Ginny was the only one of Harry's friends aware of that ability and things began to fall into place. Harry had even said that Ginny had "found him out." What if in rescuing Ginny he had somehow revealed his identity to her? Or perhaps she was able to put the pieces together after the fact.

Even with all the evidence pointing to Harry, there were a lot of problems with that theory. For one, how could Harry have been in Diagon Alley to save Ginny over the summer? How could he have snuck out of Hogwarts into Hogsmeade on Halloween? And how had he found himself at the home of Amelia Bones the previous evening? The question was not only how he managed to get to these places but also how he knew to be there. Their information last night had come straight from Severus. There was no way Harry could have been privy to that information - unless he had a vision, but Remus liked to think Harry would not be so cavalier as to march off to battle without informing Dumbledore or another member of the Order first.

Then again, if it was not Harry it posed an even greater question of where he was getting his information. Did he have his own source of information amongst the Death Eaters? Or was his source perhaps with the Order? And what was his motivation? Why was he appearing to help them? Did he have any battles with the Death Eaters that they were unaware of?

There was also the obvious question of how Harry would even be able to perform magic outside of Hogwarts without getting in trouble with the Ministry. Even if Fudge was no longer eager to make Harry out to be unstable, he would still no doubt use an infraction as some means of leverage for his own political gain.

Even if Harry could somehow find ways around all those obstacles, the fact of the matter was that this kid could fight. Harry was a powerful wizard in his own right, but Remus knew him well enough to know that he was not anywhere near the level of skill displayed by the young man he had met the previous evening. The only evidence he really had to the contrary was a dream where Sirius had informed him otherwise. The dream had felt real, but he was highly sceptical. It was stretching the limits of his imagination to be able to conceive that the dream was real, that Sirius had really visited him. Then again, it was too large a coincidence to overlook.

Remus, therefore, was anxious and nervous, but, most of all, intrigued when Dumbledore summoned both Tonks and him to his office in Hogwarts in order to discuss some new information brought to light on the strangers. He was not entirely sure what he hoped to find out. Deep down, he hoped his suspicions about Harry proved to be false. He did not want to think of Harry putting himself at such risk. He was still just a boy – not an ordinary one by any means, but a boy just the same. He was sixteen years old, not yet of age and still in school. He did not belong on the battlefield.

If this new information confirmed his suspicions, he knew he would be left in an uncomfortable position. His duty to the Order would require him to divulge Harry's possible involvement, yet his duty to Harry would require him to keep his silence – at least until he had an opportunity to talk to Harry first. He was not even sure if it would be a

good thing for Dumbledore to know. If it really was Harry, he was obviously much more skilled than any of them could guess. Should they try to keep him under lock and key, he could likely slip by them and run off on his own. Remus was aware of how Harry felt being forced to live with his relatives every summer. He would not put it past him to rebel should any more of his freedoms be rescinded; his dream had even warned him of that very thing. Whether it was real or just his subconscious, Remus could not deny the validity of Sirius's warning.

What it all amounted to for Remus, at least for the time being, was a headache. Tonks stepped through the fireplace before him, and he followed directly after. When he arrived in the Headmaster's office, Tonks was already seating herself in one of two armchairs before the Headmaster's desk. Albus was seated in his desk chair with his hands steeped in front of his face, his elbows resting on the desk. He gestured one of his hands towards the other chair before returning his hands to their steeped position. Remus took the chair and looked over to Tonks before returning his attention to the Headmaster.

"You said you had some new information about our mysterious allies you wished to discuss?" Remus asked, wanting to get the meeting underway.

"Indeed," the Headmaster replied. "Severus was summoned earlier this evening, and he was made privy to some interesting information about these young men that, if true, would seem to confirm some of our earlier suspicions."

Remus felt his eyebrows rise into his hairline as he stared into the Headmaster's impassive face. "Oh?"

"I was wondering," Albus continued conversationally, "if either of you had noticed a lone, dark-feathered bird at any point during your time at the Bones residence."

Remus wracked his brain trying to think of any birds. He did not remember seeing anything, so he shook his head. "I don't recall

seeing any birds at all.” He looked over at Tonks to see her shaking her head as well.

“Me neither,” she said. “We didn’t have much time to scope out the area beforehand, and once the battle got started, we were too busy to notice much of anything except all the spells flying at us.”

Remus nodded grimly in agreement. He turned back to the Headmaster to find him nodding as if he had expected that response.

“Voldemort was unhappy to learn that his plans had failed, and when he was informed that this young man had once again nearly single-handedly fought off such a large group of his followers, he was all the more furious. When Voldemort demanded to hear all they could tell about this young man, one Death Eater claimed he saw a bird fly down to the ground near where the young man first appeared. He did not see the bird transform into the young man, but he never noticed the bird take off again. It would stand to reason that one of the young men is likely an avian animagus, while the other we know to be a panther.”

Remus sat in stunned silence, staring at the Headmaster. He had considered the possibility that they were in fact correct about there being two of them, and he had assumed that if Harry was one, Ginny must be the other. After all, if Harry had taught her to be an animagus while keeping the secret from Ron and Hermione, she was the only logical conclusion. It would be typical of Harry, though, to want to keep her out of danger if possible. To think that he would have her hidden, yet shielding him was certainly not unthinkable.

This new bit of information, however, threw all his theories out the window. If one of them really was an avian animagus, then maybe the panther was just a coincidence. Maybe Ginny stumbled over Harry’s animagus form on accident, thinking she was tracking down her saviour.

A noise at his side drew his attention out of his thoughts. Tonks was shifting in her seat while the Headmaster regarded the two of them. “I’m sorry, Headmaster,” Remus said. “I wish I could confirm the

information, but I honestly don't remember seeing a bird. If they really are twins, though, it would stand to reason that if one is an animagus, the other would also be."

"Yes, I believe so as well," Albus responded. "These boys remain quite the mystery. We can be glad we seem to be on the same side for now, but something about them troubles me. They seem keen to avoid contact with the Order as much as possible. What reason could they have to avoid us? Surely we could accomplish more by working together. This Jim's cold behaviour last night, in particular, worries me."

"In all fairness," Remus interjected, "he had been through quite the wringer by the time we spoke. He was not cold to me, per se; he was direct and to the point. He assumed the role of leader and acted the part. You can claim he had no right to assume that role. He was most likely the youngest person there, but he was clearly the most skilled. I was not about to begrudge him that as he had just saved our lives. And, as I said last night, he seemed to be in a rush and almost preoccupied with something. If his brother or friend or partner was injured, that could explain why he was in a foul mood."

"Alas, you are quite correct, Remus," Dumbledore admitted. "We do not know enough about these boys to make any judgments. I am merely...cautious at the moment. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, but only so far as our interests coincide."

Remus nodded his understanding. They would not assume that they would always be on the same side until they knew for sure where these young men stood. They were dismissed shortly afterwards and retired back to Headquarters. That night, sleep once again eluded Remus as the mystery seemed only to deepen. Before the meeting he had been all but convinced that Harry was at least one if not both of these men. Now, however, he was far from certain.

There was nothing he could do about it now, however. It was still weeks until the next full moon when he would see Harry again. If he had guessed correctly about the Devil's Fire, that burn was not likely to go anywhere. Perhaps he could use that to his advantage.

OoOoO

“Hey mate,” Ron’s voice interrupted his concentration as he was writing an essay for Potions.

Laying down his quill, Harry looked up at his friend, who was leaning over the back of the chair opposite his. “What’s up?” he asked.

“I was thinking that we should probably start talking about starting Quidditch practices back up,” Ron stated, gesturing with his hands in front of him as his elbows rested on the top of the chair. “We’re well into the new term, so it’s about time we start looking forward to our next game.”

Quidditch. Harry had not given it any thought, but he wondered how his chest would affect his ability to play. His movements were limited at the moment, and he had no idea how long things would remain that way.

He quickly pushed those thoughts out of his mind as he realized Ron was awaiting a response. “That makes sense,” Harry agreed. “I haven’t got my new broom yet, but I imagine it should be arriving within the next week or two. If it’s not here in time for our first practice, I can just use a school broom or something.”

Ron leaned back and gripped his hands on the top of the chair. “Do you want me to just make up the schedule or...”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Harry answered. “As long as you don’t schedule them during my classes, whatever times you pick are fine with me.”

“Er – right,” Ron replied uncomfortably. “I’ll talk to Hooch and get the pitch scheduled and post the schedule for the team.”

“Sounds good. Thanks Ron,” Harry said.

“No problem.” Ron glanced down at the roll of parchment Harry had been writing on. “What are you working on?”

“Potions,” Harry replied in a sour voice.

“Can’t say I miss that class,” Ron responded a bit too smugly. “Auror career may be out of the question, but I think it’s worth it to be free of that git.”

“You know,” Harry said. “I think you might just be right.”

Ron stuck around for a little while longer before wandering off, leaving Harry by himself. Harry looked back down at the parchment he had been writing on. Try as he might to regain his earlier train of thought, Harry could not stop thinking about Quidditch. It had been a long time since he had played the game. He looked forward to playing again, but he was not looking forward to getting on a broom in the near future with his chest in its current condition.

He tapped his lips with the feather of his quill as he thought over how he would handle the situation. It was not as if he could just pretend to be uninterested in Quidditch. Everyone knew how much he loved the game. He could not even use Ron kicking him off the team as an excuse since he had already been reinstated and even made a co-captain.

In short, there was no easy way out of the situation. He could not afford to expose his secrets by revealing the burn. After all the hard work he had put in – all the sacrifice and the secrecy – he could not give that all up. He would have to play through it. His numbing charms were helping a lot; he could only hope the activity would not hamper his chest’s ability to heal.

OoOoO

The next few days were not without tension. Though Harry was loathe to admit it, let alone show it, he was rather concerned about the wound to his chest. Ginny was worrying enough for the both of them, however, and the last thing he wanted to do was add to it. He had noticed dark circles forming around her eyes and confronted her about it. She easily admitted to having trouble sleeping lately; the

reason why she was having such difficulty was not as easy for her to talk about. Harry had listened as she explained her experience in the Room of Requirement that night and her burst of wandless magic.

She described to him the scene that kept haunting her dreams, forcing her into wakefulness. It would start with her in the Room of Requirement, fighting the dummies as she had that night. She would watch the dummy being consumed by the flames of her wandless spell, but the scene would shift. The flames would never die, but the dummy would morph itself. Its face would be given definition. Hair would sprout from its head. After a moment, she would watch as Harry was consumed by the flames. In the darkness she could make out the form of a Death Eater, wand trained on his victim, laughing at the agony he was causing to Harry.

Harry had not known what to do after listening to the description of her nightmare. All he could do was hold her and assure her that everything was okay. He had been rather worried about Ginny's reaction to the burn. His biggest fear had been that she would try to get him to stop taking so many risks, to leave the war to Dumbledore and the Order. Even despite her nightmares, nothing of that sort had ever left her lips. True, she was worried about him, but she still did her best to take care of him.

If Ginny had her way, he would be holed up in bed until his chest was at least well on its way to recovery, if not wholly healed, but she did not push him. She listened to his reasons and respected him enough to make his own decisions. That was one of the things he liked about her. She could disagree with him and vocalize her opinions without pressing him. In turn, she was willing to accept his viewpoint and permit him make his own decisions about his life.

It was strange, he mused, to have her so concerned over his well-being. Whenever they were together, she insisted on doing things for him to keep him from having to move a muscle. When she gave him her daily inspection, she touched him in a way that was wholly unfamiliar to Harry. Her touch was so gentle.

Harry was not completely unfamiliar with being taken care of. He had spent more than enough time in a bed in the Hospital Wing as

Madame Pomfrey's charge, but the Healer had always been brisk and cool, demanding. It was clear that she wanted to heal him, but she was not very personable in her ministrations.

Being treated by Ginny was entirely different and foreign, though certainly not unwelcome. She leaned over his body, her eyes scanning his chest for some sign of change or improvement, her hands softly gliding over his skin around the edge of the burns. Her special brand of treatment almost made it all worthwhile.

Almost.

Unfortunately, the salve Ginny had created for him did not appear to be having any effect after a few days of use. By Wednesday, there was no visible change to the area, nor was the pain diminished in any way. He supposed he should be glad that his chest was not getting any worse.

On Monday, he had begun researching the curse in the library, looking for any mention of it either in Dark Arts or Healing tomes. He found several mentions of the curse but was unable to find anything that might help them in treating it. In fact, the little information he found did not bode well for him. There were not many documented survivors of the curse. Of those he had read about, none had ever managed to fully treat the damaged skin. The pain eventually dimmed, but the skin was forever marred.

Another scar - a horrid, ugly reminder of the war and what it was costing him. He was afraid to share his discovery with Ginny; he worried how she would react to that knowledge. She knew the path he had chosen to take, but he did not know how much thought she had given to it. Had she really considered all the risks he was taking? Had she faced the possibility that one day he might not come back? If she had not already, the scar would be a constant reminder of that risk. He worried what that would do to her - to them, so he continued to scour through the various texts, looking for some glimmer of hope to give to her - to himself.

As Ginny finished her examination, she sat back. She was on the ground in front of the sofa in his office, her back now resting against

the table. Her eyes searched his face for a moment before asking, "How's your research coming?"

Harry glanced down, avoiding her gaze.

He heard her deep intake of breath before her voice once again permeated the silence. "I think you need to see a healer."

He closed his eyes, his head still downcast. He had feared it would come to this, and he knew he would need to share his findings. "I don't think that will help," he said quietly, never lifting his head.

"Harry, look at me," she demanded. He complied, slowly raising his head until his eyes met hers. "The burn looks as bad as it did that night. Nothing we're doing seems to be helping at all. You need to get it looked at."

"They won't be able to do anything for it," he told her dejectedly.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, her voice slightly breathless.

"There is no treatment for it," he told her. "There aren't very many people who have even survived the curse. The burns of all those that have survived were untreatable. The pain should eventually fade, but the skin is irreparable."

Silence followed his pronouncement. Her eyes left his face and travelled down to his chest, and he wondered what she was thinking. Was she imagining him years down the line with his chest still horribly marred, possibly with even more scars by that time? Could she find him attractive like this? Would she want him like this?

Her eyes continued to focus on his bare flesh, and Harry began to grow uncomfortable under her scrutiny. He wished she would say something, or do something – anything. Anything would be better than this painful silence. Unable to bear it any longer, he spoke, "Say something."

She jumped, startled, and her head shot to his, their eyes locking. Her features took on an apologetic tone as she said, "I'm sorry. I got lost in thought."

"What were you thinking about?" he asked, anxious, yet also dreading the answer.

"You," she answered simply.

Harry just stared into her eyes, unsure what to say or how to respond to her.

She sighed after a moment and shifted, climbing onto her knees to face him. She leant over him slightly and took his cheek in her hand. He leaned into her touch, revelling in the warmth of her hand, the softness of her skin. "You're worried," she stated, causing Harry's eyes to flick back to hers. He nodded slowly. "What about?"

He looked away from her for a moment, before turning back to her as he began his answer. "A lot of things, I guess." He paused, unsure how to continue. She did not prompt him, did not question him. Her thumb began to caress the skin of his cheek as she continued to look down on him. He took a moment to enjoy the sensation her gentle touch caused before focusing his thoughts back on topic. "I'm worried about what will happen. There were a lot of moments I could have – should have – died in that battle. I was lucky more times than I can count, and I should be grateful that I escaped with only this." He gestured to his chest and took a long moment to examine the disfigurement.

"Do you regret the decisions you've made?" Ginny asked suddenly.

Harry lifted his head back up to meet her gaze for a long moment before shaking it back and forth against her hand. "No."

"You have no idea how hard it is to sit here on the sidelines while you go out to fight this war," she said. "Part of me wants to try to convince you not to go, and another part of me wants to convince you to let me go with you. I know I wouldn't win either argument – at least

not yet. I like to think that if I train hard enough, you'll let me come when I'm ready. Until then, I'm forced to wait here on those nights, hoping you'll return to me."

Harry turned his head in her hand, pressing his lips to her palm. He knew being left behind must be hard on her, but he had never stopped to realise just how taxing that could be. In thinking about it in that moment and seeing the effect it obviously had on her, he suddenly found a new appreciation for her and for all she did to support him. He sought out her free hand, giving it a comforting squeeze as she continued.

"What you're doing is important, Harry; I know that better than most. I don't know why everything always seems to fall to you, but you always rise to the challenge. Whether it's luck or skill or some combination thereof, you have a gift for coming out on top of these situations. I've seen you training. I've seen the amount of effort you put into it. I've seen the amount of studying you've done. Nobody is preparing for war the way you are, and there is nothing more you could have done to prepare for it."

She took a deep, steadying breath before continuing, her eyes boring into his. "If you were lucky to survive the last battle, then thank whatever deity you prefer and use the experience to better yourself. Learn from your mistakes, and become stronger from them. Don't let this," she gestured to his chest with their clasped hands, "deter you from your path. If you must, use it as motivation to strive to become better."

Harry's gaze remained on his chest as she finished. The burn would certainly be a strong motivator to continue his training regimen. It would also serve as a constant reminder that no matter how far he had come, he still had a long road ahead of him. If he was to one day defeat Voldemort, he would need to be much stronger and more versatile.

It was not his chosen path that held his true concern, however. As nice as it was to receive validation from Ginny on that point, it was a different kind of validation, acceptance, he needed from her, though he was unsure if she would be able to give it.

She must have sensed his internal struggle, for she once again turned his face back towards hers and asked, "What's really bothering you?"

He released a long, slow breath. "Look at me," he said. "Take a good look. I'm always going to look this way."

"You never struck me as one to be concerned about his looks," she commented teasingly, pulling her hand away from his cheek.

He looked up at her, no smile on his lips, causing her smile to falter. "You deserve more than I could ever offer. You deserve a normal life where you don't have to sit at home wondering if I'll survive the night. You deserve someone whole and unmarred, someone you could be attracted to."

"You're afraid I'm going to leave you?" she asked. "Over this?"

Harry found himself unable to meet her gaze. His head was tilted back, and he was staring straight up at the ceiling. He heard movement coming from her but did not shift his gaze in the slightest – not until he felt a truly odd sensation. He turned his head down to find Ginny leaning over him, her eyes gazing up into his face, her lips pressed lightly against his chest.

Her lips lingered there for a long moment before she pulled back, her eyes never leaving his. "I see a lot of things when I look at your chest. I see your struggle. Life has never been kind to you, yet you get up every morning ready to tackle whatever might come your way. I see your courage and bravery. I have never seen you let your fears overpower you. I have never seen you give up or give in. No matter the odds, you would always choose to fight for what is right. I see your sacrifice. I see all the traits in you that I admire, the traits that have attracted me to you."

"I want you to listen to me, Harry, because I don't want you to ever doubt this. I'm attracted to you for a lot of reasons. Yes, your body is

a part of that, and it still is. I don't care how many scars you have; I will always be attracted to you."

Harry blinked his eyes closed as he listened to her words. Despite his struggle, he felt a single tear escape out of the corner of his eye and roll down his cheek. He had not realised just how worried he had been over her reaction. Ginny and he had only recently gotten together, yet now he could hardly imagine his life without her in it.

As the tear traced its way close to his jaw, he felt the pad of Ginny's thumb brush it away. Harry opened his eyes to find that she had crawled up to kneel right in front of his face. He reached his hand out to cup her cheek. He longed to lean over and kiss her, but he could not manage the movement with his chest. She seemed to have read his thoughts though – or perhaps she was just of a similar mind – for she leaned in and captured his lips in a kiss.

Harry's hand worked its way into her hair, running his fingers through her fiery locks as his lips moved with hers. Their lips worked slowly, taking their time to enjoy the kiss. When she pulled away a few minutes later, Harry turned his head to follow her. She remained there, her face only a decimetre away from his, and he felt the need to say something. "Ginny, I..." he trailed off for a long moment trying to work out what he wanted to say. As he opened his mouth back up to continue, she held a finger up to his lips.

"Shh," she said quietly. "You don't have to say anything, Harry." She clasped both of her hands around his and brought it up to her lips where she pressed a kiss on the back of his palm. "Come on. Let's get your shirt and robes back on."

OoOoO

Harry was eating breakfast the next morning beside Ginny. He had spent the previous hour alternately reading a book on healing charms and watching Ginny as she worked out, though the latter activity took up far more of his time than he would have liked. He quickly found that any exercise that had Ginny jumping was entirely too distracting. As he would not normally be reading at that time, it hardly set him

back, but he still wished he had gotten more accomplished – not that he thought of the time as wasted.

The two were joined shortly by Hermione, Ron, and Neville. Neville sat beside Harry while the other two sat across from the two boys. After giving his greetings, Harry tucked into his plate of bacon and eggs while the new arrivals filled their plates. Hermione had a book open on the table in front of her before she had even taken a bite. They had an exam in Transfiguration that afternoon. Harry was not concerned about it, but Hermione was not one to waste any opportunity to get some extra studying in.

Neville must have caught where his attention was aimed, for he asked, “Ready for the test today?”

“Yeah, it shouldn’t be too bad,” Harry answered. “What about you?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I think,” Neville replied.

“You’ll do fine,” Harry said. “You’ve been doing pretty well in class the past couple weeks.”

“It helps when you spend most of your time helping me,” Neville quipped. “Thanks, by the way.”

Harry waved his hand dismissively. “Nothing to thank me for.” As he finished saying it, he felt a nudge in his side. Turning, he found Ginny’s attention focused on him.

“You really need to learn to just accept a compliment,” she stated.

Harry stuck his tongue out at her and turned back towards Neville. “Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted.” He felt Ginny’s foot drop onto his own. It did not hurt in the slightest, but he could hardly let her have the last shot. “You figured everything out on your own; I just pointed you in the right direction.” As he said this, he slid his leg behind hers and hooked his foot out to catch her legs as he pulled back against her, causing Ginny to nearly topple over onto

her side in the process. He struggled to keep a straight face as he heard her “Oomph” of surprise.

He turned to give her a smirk just as Ginny was moving to give him a playful shove in the back. His action caught her by surprise, and she was unable to pull back in time to avoid hitting him in the chest. He inhaled sharply in surprise and pain as she struck him. He had applied a numbing charm early that morning, of course, but its effects had begun to fade. Ginny’s smile vanished completely off her face, replaced by a look of worry and repentance.

For a moment the two just looked at each other helplessly. Neither could react for fear of arousing suspicion. After a short moment, Harry offered her a small smile to try to convey that he was okay and did not hold her at fault. She hardly seemed consoled but did her best to plaster a smile back onto her face; meanwhile, he did his best to mask the pain and act as if nothing was the matter.

As he was turning back towards Neville, Ron loudly set down his fork on his now-barren plate and said. “I posted the Quidditch schedule this morning.” Harry felt Ginny’s hand rest on his leg above his knee. He reached down and laid his hand atop hers, squeezing her hand in comfort as he kept his attention focused on Ron. “We start practice next week, so be prepared.”

Harry nodded as his thoughts turned back to Quidditch. Knowing what he did now about his chest, Harry was very worried that he would be unable to play. He needed to be flexible and agile in his movements to compete as a Seeker, and he was not sure his chest would be able to handle the stress. He worried that he would not be effective in the position and, even worse, that his injuries would be exposed to the team and potentially the entire school.

Harry heard a rustle overhead signalling the arrival of the owls for the morning post. Two owls slowly descended before him carrying a long package between them. They dropped the parcel on the table in front of him without regard to the plates of food in the way. Harry had little doubt of what it was, and it did little to improve his mood. He forced a wide smile onto his face while inside he felt like someone had taken a beater’s bat to his stomach.

Harry looked around, taking in the faces of all those around him. Ron had a look of unholy glee plastered across his face. Neville and Hermione both looked interested and mildly excited. Ginny seemed to be thinking along a similar vein as he, for she only offered him a small smile and a light squeeze to his hand. He noticed that he was the centre of much attention throughout the hall as many had noticed the package.

“C’mon mate, open it!” Ron urged with unrestrained excitement.

Harry did his best to act as thrilled as he would have been had the broom arrived a week earlier. He pulled his hand away from Ginny and reached out to open the parcel. Ron must have felt he was taking too long. He reached out to help, but Hermione batted his hand away before he had even touched anything. Harry continued at his leisurely pace until he had unearthed the broom, a brand new Nimbus 2050. Apparently they decided to forgo models 2002-2049.

He picked up the broom and turned it in his hands as his eyes raked over the shaft and down to the precisely tuned bristles.

“Wicked,” Ron breathed out.

Harry privately agreed, though he was hardly in the mood to celebrate the fact. Nevertheless he blew out a breath and exclaimed in a whisper, “Brilliant!”

“Can I try it out mate?” Ron asked then let out a startled “Oomph.” Harry looked down to see Ron rub at his midsection as he turned his head to glare at Hermione for a second. Hermione gave him a pointed look, and, without any words spoken, Ron turned back to Harry, “After you, of course.”

“Can’t tonight,” Harry said. “I need to meet with Dumbledore after dinner for our weekly lesson, and I’ve got a ton of other work to do. Maybe over the weekend or something,” Harry committed vaguely. He knew he would not be able to put it off forever, but he figured it would be best to give his chest as much time as possible to heal.

Ginny, whose hand had never left Harry's leg, gave him another comforting squeeze just above his knee. Why did the broom have to arrive now? It was like rubbing salt in an open wound. The prospect of trying out his new broom should have left him elated; instead, he wished the broom had never come. All in all, it was not the best start to his day. He turned to Ginny and gave her a small, sad smile knowing she was thinking the same thing he was. It was not fair, but he – they – would find a way through this.

OoOoO

That evening Harry found himself sitting across from the Headmaster for their weekly Occlumency lesson. He was distinctly distracted but trying his best not to show it. He had applied numbing charms to his chest before the lesson, so his chest was not bothering him, though he was overtly aware of the lack of feeling coming from that area. He was almost too concentrated on not giving away any signs of his injury. As such, he was not making much progress in his actual Occlumency abilities, though he felt he was performing well enough so as not to draw suspicion.

His chest was not the only distraction for him, however. The other distraction, surprisingly enough, came from Fawkes. It was odd, but Harry found his attention constantly drawn to the phoenix. Whenever he looked towards the perch, Fawkes always managed to meet his eye, but then his gaze would shift slightly. Harry was left with the distinct impression that Fawkes was trying to convey something to him, though Harry was not sure what.

He did his best to put the matter out of his mind and was able to get through the lesson without drawing the suspicion of the Headmaster, yet he still felt as if Fawkes was calling out to him. Unable to resist, as Harry rose from his seat, he walked by Fawkes's perch. "Goodnight Professor," Harry said, looking over to Dumbledore. He turned back to Fawkes and reached his hand out as he said, "Goodnight Fawkes."

The phoenix leaned his head into Harry's hand, and Harry felt a copious amount of a wet substance smear across his palm. As Harry

pulled his hand away, he moved to wipe it off on his robes when something connected in his brain, stopping him. Fawkes's odd glances. Phoenix tears. He turned and walked to the door, careful to keep his right hand from touching anything. He turned the knob with his left hand, walked out onto the staircase, and pulled the door shut with his left hand behind him.

With the door closed, Harry looked down at his robes. They were in the way. With hardly a thought, a split spread down his front, opening the robes up for him. Wearing a button down shirt, Harry did not take the time to properly undo each button. Instead, he just ripped the shirt open with his left hand. Once his chest was exposed, he lifted his still-damp right hand and began to spread it over his marred skin.

The reaction was instant. As his hand crossed his chest, Harry could see the marked flesh fading into the rest of his skin. Within a matter of seconds there was no trace of his former wound. Harry cancelled the numbing charm still affecting his chest and felt no pain. He breathed in deeply, revelling in the wonderful sensation the simple action induced.

A wide smile stretched across his face, and he turned back to the door. Using mindspeak, Harry sent, "Thank you, Fawkes." He did not receive a response, but he felt a warm rush overtake him momentarily. Spinning back around, Harry looked down at himself and took in the state of his clothes. Examining his shirt, he noticed that all of the buttons save one were still intact. He did the others up and with a simple summoning charm located the missing button.

Looking at his robes, Harry performed a simple Reparo and found the fabric weaving itself back together, if a little crudely. He could see the line from the tear, but he was not concerned with it – not at the moment. Satisfied, he rushed down the stairs, feet barely keeping up with him, and emerged into the hallway. Harry wasted no time making his way up the staircases and down the corridors that would lead him his office.

He activated the map on the wall, and his eyes immediately scanned the two most likely places he would find her. The library.

He was out the door in seconds and was already turning a corner by the time he heard the bang of his slamming door echoing in the corridor. He flew down a flight of steps and made a beeline for the library. He pushed the door open, and his eyes locked onto her fiery red hair. He strode purposely towards her, his attention never straying.

He came up behind her and put his arm on her shoulder as he leaned over to whisper in her opposite ear, "Come with me."

OoOoO

Ginny was startled when a hand landed on her shoulder and she felt a presence close behind her. Her worries were calmed when she heard Harry's voice and caught his scent. The feel of his warm breath in her ear was enough to cause a shiver to run down her spine. She turned her head to look at him and saw his wide smile and twinkling eyes. She spun back around and quickly noticed that every head at the table was locked onto them. A few wore surprised expressions while the others held knowing looks. She blushed at their scrutiny.

She could not believe that Harry would approach her in such a manner with all these people around. He had been so careful and secretive since they had gotten together, and now here he was practically announcing their relationship to the entire library – or her entire table at least. Lucky for them, none of the friends she was studying with were known for their gossiping.

She clapped her text book shut and stuffed it in her bag as she rose from her seat and turned back towards Harry. He was bouncing on the balls of his heels and literally seemed as though he could not stop moving. "Come on," he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her towards the exit.

She turned to wave goodbye to her friends as she allowed him to guide her out of the library and up a flight of stairs towards his office. Her eyes barely strayed from Harry, who maintained his wide smile without fault, though he said absolutely nothing. He ushered her inside his office, following in after her. She heard the door close and turned around to face him.

As she turned she found herself bumping into Harry's chest. She looked up into his face to find him smiling down on her, but his smile had shifted. It was not so wide but more subtle and sly. His hand reached up to cup her cheek, and he tilted her face up. His lips quickly caught hers in a deep, searing kiss. She was initially caught off guard but quickly lost herself in the kiss. After a long moment, he broke the kiss and let his head slide to the side as he hugged her tightly, picking her up and spinning her around.

"Harry!" she yelled. She had no idea what had gotten into him. He had been noticeably sullen for the past few days as his burn refused to heal. All of a sudden something clicked in her brain. She broke the hug, pulling away from him. "Harry, your chest!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing? You could be making it worse!"

His damn smile was back in full force, and it gave her a moment's pause. "What's going on?" she demanded in a somewhat calmer tone.

He did not speak. Rather, he pulled his robes over his head, then slowly unbuttoned his shirt. When he opened it up, she found herself staring at his chest, but it looked nothing like it had every evening that week when she had examined it. There was not the slightest trace of a scar.

She felt his smooth skin on her fingers and the toned muscle beneath her hand, yet she had no recollection of even reaching her hand out in the first place. Her eyes drifted up the length of her arm, leading onto Harry's chest, and finally rising up to meet his eyes. "How is this possible?"

Harry smiled then, his eyes twinkling merrily as he dropped his head down to catch her lips again in a short kiss. Her eyes had closed, and when she opened them, she found Harry's face hovering in front of her, his eyes level with her own. His tongue darted out of his mouth for a moment, drawing her gaze to his lips, and she watched as they began moving as he said one simple word. "Fawkes."

“Fawkes?” she parroted unconsciously as her mind quickly made the connection to phoenix tears. Then her mind made another connection. “Dumbledore!?”

Harry shook his head and gave a light chuckle. “Doesn’t have a clue,” he supplied.

She tried to assimilate this new information, struggling to make sense of it all. Harry took pity on her as he stepped past her, grabbing her around the waist, and pulling her into his lap as he sat in a nearby armchair. He then proceeded to explain the events of the evening.

They were both silent for a long time after he had finished his story. One of her hands was idly stroking his chest from her perch on his lap. Harry's right hand lay on his chest beside hers; his left arm was wrapped around Ginny, his hand resting just above her waistline. Ginny had tucked her head into the crook of Harry's neck, tilted slightly downward so that she could gaze at his chest.

She was having trouble wrapping her mind around everything. This whole week had been full of stress. She was constantly worried for Harry – both about his chest and how he was handling it all. It was hard to accept that it was all over just like that. All that worry and stress just disappeared in an instant.

As her hand continued to stroke his chest, she lifted her head up from his shoulder. Her other arm had been wrapped around his neck, and she used that hand to pull his head down to hers, capturing his lips with hers. This kiss was slow and languid – a stark contrast to their last kiss, but there was no rush. She wanted to take her time and enjoy it. She felt Harry pull her in tightly at her waist. Her hand was no longer just idly stroking his chest; she was tracing the muscles with her hands, revelling in the solidity of his body.

They spent the remainder of their evening in his office cuddled on his armchair together, kissing occasionally but mostly just enjoying the chance to hold each other close. It felt good, comforting to be in his arms – to have Harry healthy, happy, and whole. And really, there was no better way to spend an evening than in Harry's embrace.

Chapter 19: Show Me Your Secrets

The next morning when Ron again asked Harry about trying out his new broom, Harry was so excited at the prospect that he quickly agreed to go test it out after DADA that afternoon. As luck would have it, Ginny would finish her last class at that time as well, so she would be joining them with her own new broom.

When the time arrived, Harry could barely contain his excitement. He had been dreading flying and Quidditch all week long, but now he would be able to enjoy it as he always had. When Ginny met them in the common room, she informed them that Luna would be joining them. Harry was unaware that Luna enjoyed flying, but then he realised that there was probably a lot he did not know about Luna. Given the fact that she was in both another year and another house altogether, he hardly ever saw her.

Once he, Ron, Ginny, and Neville were ready in the common room, Harry turned towards Hermione. "You sure you don't want to come?" he asked her one last time. She was already engrossed in her studies at a nearby table and took a moment to finish writing something before putting down her quill and looking up.

"No, it's too cold to read outside," Hermione answered.

"You could always join us in the air, you know," Ginny responded.

Hermione looked up from her books and said, "I know; I just don't like flying. Thank you for the offer, though."

Harry could just barely hear Ron mutter, "Barking mad." But he thought it best to ignore the remark.

"Suit yourself," Neville said. "But if you change your mind, you know where to find us."

Her only response was a smile. The four set off and met up with Luna in the entrance hall. Harry was surprised to find that Luna had

brought a broom of her own. That meant none of them would need to use a school broom as Ginny had lent Neville her old broom.

It was quite chilly for some casual flying, but Harry could care less. The fact that he could easily apply warming charms if the cold got to him certainly encouraged his indifference. He wasted little time jumping onto his broom once they had reached the grounds of the pitch. He rocketed up into the air, letting out a whoop of joy as he did so. It had been much too long since he had done this – fly for pure pleasure.

He cut around the field, making sharp turns and putting on bursts of speed, testing the limits of the broom. As he had been promised, he could feel the improvements both in manoeuvrability and acceleration over the Firebolt. He leaned forward, pressing his chest to the shaft and pushed the broom for all it was worth. He was sensitive to the air currents around him and used them to his advantage as he strived to push the broom as fast as it could go.

It had been a while since he had flown his Firebolt, but he did not think there was much difference in their maximum speeds. The new Nimbus might be a little faster but not by much. Harry barely gave the matter much thought as he was just thrilled to be back up in the air. He noticed that the others had risen up into the air now, so he flew back towards them. Ron was holding a Quaffle, tossing it back and forth from hand to hand. As Harry drew in closer, Ron threw the ball in his direction. Harry put on a burst of speed and deftly plucked the Quaffle out of the air and immediately threw to Ginny.

She caught the ball and let it roll off her fingers towards Neville. Her aim was true, and Neville did not need to move to catch the ball. Neville had come a long way since their first flying lesson six years ago, but he was still not natural in the air. He had trouble managing the broom with just one hand, and his taking both hands off the shaft for a moment to catch the ball was asking for trouble.

Luna, surprisingly, had very little trouble controlling her broom while handling the Quaffle. She was not as adept as the Quidditch players, but Harry was pleasantly surprised to see her holding her own. Her passes, on the other hand, were not always the most accurate, but

Harry found that he enjoyed having to chase down the ball. Besides, his own throws were not always on target. Neville was the only one who seemed fazed by the inaccurate throws, though he never said a word about it.

They tossed the Quaffle around for a bit before Harry took another turn around the pitch and performed a couple dives. He let Ron have a shot at the broom next, and he played catch with the others as Ron tested out the broom. When each of his friends had taken a ride on the new broom, Harry reclaimed it. As the afternoon waned, they played around a bit longer before finally heading in to wash up for supper.

Later that night, Harry was reading in the common room when Hermione approached him asking if he had a moment to talk. When Harry replied affirmatively, she asked if they could take a walk. She was acting a bit peculiar, so Harry, curiosity piqued, agreed. He quickly packed up his things and ran them up to his room. Coming back down the stairs, Harry escorted Hermione through the portrait hole. He had no particular direction in mind, so he let Hermione set the pace and course of their wanderings.

After a minute of silence, Harry finally let his curiosity get the better of him as he asked, "What is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Hermione looked to him for a moment before turning her attention to the floor in front of her. She seemed nervous and unsure of herself, making Harry wonder just what was going on with her. He kept his silence as she seemed to be mulling over how to broach the subject at hand – whatever that subject might be.

After another minute she stopped walking and turned to him. She hesitated a moment as she looked into his eyes before a steely look suffused her face, and she asked, "Did you mean everything you said to me on Boxing Day?" Harry wracked his brain to figure out what she was talking about. She must have noticed his confusion for she added, "About Ron."

"Oh," Harry said in surprise. He had not been expecting her to bring that up again. "Umm – Yeah, I did mean what I said," he stated.

“So you think I’m being unfair to Ron?” she prodded.

“If it makes you feel any better, I think Ron’s being unreasonable as well,” Harry stated with a lopsided smile.

The corner of her lips twitched into a small smile. “Maybe a little bit.”

Harry chuckled lightly at her admission. His laughter died quickly, though, and a silence fell over the pair. “So what is this really about?” Harry finally asked.

Hermione took a deep breath and started walking again. Harry matched her pace as she began to speak. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said and about Ron and everything. I like Ron,” she admitted. “I cannot tell you exactly why I like him, but I do.” She was quiet for a short moment before continuing, “I think I want to give things a chance with him.”

Harry felt a smirk tug at his lips. “You think?” When she turned to look at him, he cocked an eyebrow at her and added, “I will fully support you whichever route you choose. Just make sure this is what you want.”

She nodded at him. “I do want it. I just worry about how things will work out. And what will happen if things don’t work?”

Harry could almost have laughed at the irony of the situation – he, Remus, and now Hermione all sharing similar thoughts, afraid to begin a new relationship. So he gave her the same advice he gave Remus, the same advice he received from both Remus and Sirius. “If you let your worries and fears dictate your decision, you might spend the rest of your life wondering what could have been. If you truly want this, then go for it.”

“You think I should?” she asked him unsurely.

“If the only thing that’s holding you back is your fear of what will happen to your relationship if things don’t work, then yes, I think you

should,” Harry replied. “If things don’t work out, you’ll cross that bridge when you get there.”

She stopped walking again and was quiet for a short moment before finally turning towards him and saying, “Thanks, Harry.” She paused briefly then warmly asked, “When did you get to be so good at this?”

“Remus needed a bit of a push too,” Harry replied with a smirk.

“Professor Lupin?” she queried. “Who?”

Harry’s smile widened. “Tonks.”

“Tonks?” she asked in surprise. “They seem like a bit of an odd match.”

“Don’t forget he used to be a Marauder,” Harry stated. “I expect we’ll see more of his mischievous nature shining through with her influencing him.”

“Oh bother,” she grumbled, though a smile tugged at her lips.

Harry chuckled as, by unspoken agreement, the two began making their way back to the common room.

OoOoO

Harry was awoken early Tuesday morning with his scar throbbing in pain. He had just borne witness to a Death Eater raid on a Muggle village. It had been a brutal evening, filled with pain, torture, and murder. The Muggles had been defenceless and terrified, which had only served to fuel the enjoyment of the Death Eaters.

Voldemort had been there, giving Harry his eye-witness account of the proceedings. It had been a horrible experience for Harry, but he had learned something quite valuable that evening. Voldemort was not nearly as in control of their link as he suspected. Harry had been inside Voldemort’s head for a good ten or fifteen minutes before he was noticed, and even then, Harry suspected he was only found out

because of his reactions to the events he was forced to witness. He could not be sure, but Harry now believed that if he was able to temper his emotional reactions, he might be able to completely escape Voldemort's notice!

Since Harry had virtually no control over the link, he could not use this knowledge to actively spy on Voldemort, but it would prove useful on the occasions that he did find himself in the throes of a vision. With Voldemort unaware of his presence, he might give away information that could help Harry put a stop to future attacks.

At the moment the information was of very little consolation for having to bear through the experience of the vision, but he clung to even a small ray of light visible in the darkness that enveloped him. Dreading the experience but not wanting to put it off, Harry retreated into his mind to sort the memory of the vision into its proper place.

A short time later, though it had felt interminable to Harry, he had finished the task. Considering his options, he chose to dress for his morning workout before heading down to the common room to read; that way he would be prepared when Ginny appeared. Several minutes later, Harry was curling up in one of the overstuffed armchairs as he tucked into his latest topic of study: healing.

Ever since he had returned from the last battle with the cursed burn, Harry had focused his studies on healing. He knew now that there was little he could have done to help with that particular injury, but the experience had taught him that a wide knowledge of different healing methods would likely prove invaluable to him.

It was still quite early in the morning – well before the sun would rise into the horizon. It was hardly surprising that, as Harry read through the text, his eyelids began to droop, and his head bobbed down every so often as he alternately dozed off and jerked back into wakefulness. Exhaustion finally caught up with him, and he managed to fall off into the land of dreams.

OoOoO

Ginny walked down into the common room after throwing on her morning workout clothes. She pulled her hair back into a pony tail and tied it off with an elastic as she stepped off the stairs. As soon as she entered into the room, she knew something was not right. Harry was conspicuous only in his absence. It was unusual for her to beat him to the common room. She could also sense there was someone else in the room. She could not see them, but she could hear movement. She hoped she was not about interrupt a private moment that she did not wish to see.

She tentatively walked into the room and headed in the direction of the noise. The armchair the sound was emanating from was facing away from her, so it was not until she had come upon it that she found the source of the noise: Harry. He was thrashing about in the chair, occasionally letting out a grunt or groan.

“Harry,” she spoke softly, hoping to wake him without startling him. He did not show any response. She tried again, louder this time, but still to no avail. She tried again, only this time she also reached out to shake his arm. The moment she touched his arm, Harry sprang into action. His left arm grabbed her wrist and yanked her towards the chair while he sprang away from it. She was spun around in his grip to face him as they basically changed positions, and she watched as Harry’s right arm extended sharply towards her. Her eyes went wide and flicked up to meet Harry’s.

His hand stopped abruptly just short of her face as recognition dawned in Harry’s eyes. An intense look of focus and concentration overtook his features as she saw a light envelop his hand for a moment before slowly diminishing and seemingly sinking back into his skin. The only sound in the room was their harsh breathing as each dealt with the rush of adrenaline of the moment.

After a very short silence, she demanded, “What just happened?”

“Sorry,” Harry murmured, his head downcast.

Her mind was churning to make sense of the events. He must have been having a bad dream or a vision; that much was obvious. When

she had shaken him awake, he had gone on the offensive as if to attack her. If she was not mistaken, he had come dangerously close to hexing her. Almost against her will she asked, "What spell was that?"

Harry mumbled something, but she could not make it out.

"Harry," she said a bit impatiently. With a sigh, he finally looked up to meet her gaze. "What spell was it?"

"I don't know," he cried, running a hand through his hair in obvious frustration and agitation. "By the time I realised what was going on, I was only concentrating on stopping it. I have no idea what it was."

Her mind tried to struggle with this knowledge, or lack of knowledge. If he had taken her as a threat, it was likely the spell was meant to incapacitate if not outright hurt her. There was no sense worrying about it now. What mattered was that he had been able to stop it. Next time she would just need to be more careful in how she approached him. She focused her eyes on Harry, noticing for the first time the vacant expression in his eyes.

"Was it a vision?" she asked softly.

"No," he answered, then shifted his gaze onto her face. "Well, I had one earlier. That – that was just a bad dream."

"Just a bad dream?" she asked him. When his only response was to shrug, her eyes narrowed momentarily as she steeled her resolve.

"Listen," Harry interrupted softly before she had a chance to speak. "I'm not trying to shut you out; I'd just rather not dwell on it. It was just Voldemort doing what he does. If we stopped to talk about it every time I had a bad dream or a vision, we'd never talk about anything else."

She felt her face soften with her resolve. She reached up her hand to cup his cheek, and he laid his hand on top of hers as he leaned his

cheek into the contact. "You know I'm always here. If you want to talk about it or just need someone to sit with you."

He smiled at her tremulously, and it warmed her heart. "Thank you."

She leaned up to give him a peck on the corner of his lips. "Any time," she whispered in reply.

Without another word spoken between them, she interlaced her fingers with his, and they headed out to the grounds for their morning jog.

OoOoO

The morning exercise served to loosen Harry up both physically and emotionally. His chest had only briefly hindered his body, but it still felt wonderful to be able to move freely. It had been odd to have his morning routine interrupted; he had not been aware how accustomed he had become to his morning jog and workout. His days did not feel right without them.

And so, jogging around the lake at his quick pace, Harry felt his anxiety wash away. The activity eventually became rather laborious, but there was some comfort to be taken in that as well. It was normal for him at this point, and it felt good to once again push his limits to improve himself.

By the time he emerged from his shower in the Room of Requirement, he felt wholly refreshed and ready to tackle the day. Ginny was only a couple minutes behind him, and he greeted her with a smile and a kiss. It still delighted him to no end to be able to just kiss Ginny whenever the mood should strike him, and the bright smile it always brought to her face made it all the more wonderful in his eyes.

Breakfast was a lively affair as Harry and Ginny were joined by Neville, Ron, and Hermione. The sixth years had a test in Defence right after the meal. Far from stressing over the impending examination or, in Hermione's case, burrowing into the textbook for some last bits of studying, they were discussing the topics to be covered. Even Ginny was getting in on the conversation. Harry had

covered a lot of the topics in his HA classes, so she had no problems keeping up with their discussion.

Sure enough, the exam proved to be fairly easy for Harry and his friends and did not require the entire class period to complete. They were allowed to leave as soon as they were finished, giving them some extra time before the next period began. For Ron and Neville this proved beneficial as they had the period off. For Harry and Hermione, however, there was not enough time to head back up to Gryffindor Tower and still make it down to the dungeons in time for Potions.

Harry let Hermione steer the conversation as they slowly made their way to the dungeons. She always wanted to discuss their answers after sitting an exam. Normally, he and especially Ron would be opposed to the idea. Once the test was behind them, they wanted to relax and get it off their minds. This time, however, Harry did not feel his usual anxiety over his performance, so he did not mind discussing his answers with her.

They passed their time that way until Potions class began. Snape was his usual horrid self. After the confrontation with Dumbledore in the beginning of term, Harry had hoped the man would have toned down some of his animosity. Unfortunately, civility seemed to be beyond Snape's grasp. He did not try to pull his wand on Harry again, but he was no less hostile towards him than he ever was.

Harry ignored the man while doing his best to keep an eye on him and the Slytherins to prevent them from tampering with his potion. The class eventually ended, and Harry split ways with Hermione as she headed off for Ancient Runes. He had an appointment with Ginny in his office.

As he contemplated being alone in his office with Ginny, he regretted that their meeting did have an agenda, but he knew her Occlumency lesson was much more important than the other activities he had in mind. She was waiting for him inside. He greeted her with a kiss, and they set off to work in short order.

They had had a couple lessons since their first, which had admittedly ended up focusing very little on Occlumency. Ginny had proven much more adept at the art after that first lesson. It was a constant battle of wills between the two of them as Harry improved his Legilimency alongside Ginny's own advancements in Occlumency. Harry had managed to break into Ginny's mind several more times, but never as easily as that first time. When he did break in, Harry found that Ginny had a much better handle on keeping her important memories to herself, and he soon gained the control to exit on his own without seeing anything he did not intend to see.

They saw similar results for the day's session as well. Harry was able to break into Ginny's mind on two occasions but was not witness to any more of Ginny's memories. Other than those two times, Ginny was able to block all his other assaults. They left his office for the Great Hall and lunch each feeling pleased with the progress they had made. They decided to sit separately with their own classmates for the meal, staggering the time when they would arrive in the Great Hall. They spent so much time together that it was bound to draw attention if they were not careful.

While not in a hurry to announce it to the school, Harry was not particularly worried about news of their relationship leaking out. It was their other activities that must be kept secret. He would do his best to avoid questions about where they were or what they were getting up to. Besides, he really did not wish to have that conversation with Ron.

As the week passed, Harry grew anxious for their first Quidditch practice, scheduled for that Thursday. Unfortunately, a wicked storm caused the practice to be postponed until the following Monday. Ron was especially glum at the announcement, but Harry quickly put any disappointment behind him. It was only a few days, after all, and there was still plenty of time until their next match.

The next morning, Harry received a letter in the morning post. Noticing who it was from, he quickly tucked the envelope into his robes without opening it. When he glanced up, he noticed Hermione eyeing him curiously, but she did not comment. When he later read the post, he found a short note from his business partners informing him to meet them in the Shrieking Shack the next evening. That was

how he found himself the next evening crouched down at a particularly low-ceilinged section of the tunnel that led to the purportedly haunted house.

Behind him, Ginny did not need to stoop to walk through the passage. She was the only one he had informed of the letter. He may have told the others about his proposal to the twins, but he was not ready to include them in everything. He also thought Hermione would have objected to sneaking off school grounds for the demonstration.

It was a short time later that Harry emerged out of the trap door and into the ragged house. He spotted the twins as soon as his head popped above ground and offered his greetings, "Gred, Forge." As soon as he had hefted himself out of the hole, he reached down and offered Ginny his hand. He glanced over in time to see the eyebrows of both boys rise into their hairline as Ginny came into view.

When neither of the duo made any sort of move, Ginny demanded, "Are you going to stand there looking like idiots all day, or are you going to say hello to your favourite sister?"

Fred was the first to recover. He shook his head and said, "You're our only sister."

"A win by default is still a win," she commented airily. Harry chuckled at her lofty attitude.

"Well, Ickle-Harrykins, Gin-Gin, you have us at a bit of a loss," George stated.

"We were expecting Harry, of course," his twin picked up.

"And maybe Ron and Hermione."

"If she could be convinced to go along with it."

"We were not expecting to be treated with the company of our darling sister."

“Not that we mind, of course.”

“It is lovely to see you, Gin-Gin.”

“We were just wondering...”

“- if perhaps there was something the two of you would like to share with us?”

“Oh, like what?” Ginny asked with an arched brow. Harry just smirked at the byplay. He was going to let Ginny take the lead since they were her brothers. He was not sure what she would want them to know. She looked over her shoulder at him, and he just cocked an eyebrow and nodded his head at her, trying to convey that it was her call.

“Like why Harrykins chose to bring you along.”

“And not Ron or Hermione.”

“I think you know enough of the answer to suit yourselves,” Ginny stated.

“Because Ron kicked Harry off the Quidditch team?”

“And Hermione wouldn’t have agreed to come?”

“Or because you two came straight over from snogging in a broom cupboard?”

“I’ll have you know,” Ginny started hotly before continuing in a teasing manner, “that Harry has an office that we much prefer to snog in.”

Fred and George gaped at her for a moment, then looked at each other before turning back to her and simultaneously breaking out in hearty guffaws. When they had calmed down after a minute they asked, “Is that true?”

“Or were you just having us on?”

Ginny turned and gave him a mischievous smile. Harry thought he had an idea of what she had in mind and felt a smirk stretching across his own lips. Ginny then turned back to her brothers and sweetly asked, “Would you like us to put on a demonstration for you?” As she said this, Harry took a step towards Ginny, who turned toward him, and he wrapped his arms around her waist. Her arms lifted onto his shoulders, her hands clasping behind his neck.

As Harry lowered his head he heard the twins shouting, “No, no we believe you.”

“We do not need to see that.”

Harry paused briefly, but Ginny pulled his head down and captured his lips in her own. It was not an obscene kiss, but when they broke apart both Fred and George had turned their backs to them. Harry smiled down at Ginny, who was smirking right back at him. Still in their embrace, Ginny called, “You can turn around now.”

They looked over their shoulders first to ensure that it was in fact safe. Satisfied, they turned back to face the two of them.

“So when did this development take place?”

“A couple weeks ago,” Ginny replied. They relinquished their hold on each other and now stood side by side with Harry’s arm around her shoulders, and Ginny’s arm around his waist.

“And how come we haven’t heard about it?”

“Yeah, I figure Mum would have had kittens in her excitement.”

“Plus we’d’ve heard her planning the wedding by now.”

Harry rolled his eyes at them as Ginny replied. "We haven't told anyone yet - which means you two will be keeping your mouths shut about it as well."

They looked at each other for a short moment before both released long suffering sighs as they gave their agreement. Apparently Ginny's tone was enough to tell them not to press the matter.

"Well, now we've got that out of the way," Harry piped in. "Don't you two have a demonstration of your own?"

"Well we're not snogging for your amusement if that's what you're thinking," George answered back heatedly.

It took half a second for his comment to register, but when it did Harry snorted in laughter. He heard Ginny chuckling lightly as well. "I'd rather not see that, thanks," she said a moment later.

"I think, my dear twin, that he means these," Fred interjected as he pulled out a bag.

"Ah yes, how silly of me to forget."

"You may want to pull up a seat."

"Because you're about to get knocked out of your socks."

"And that's a dangerous proposition while you're standing."

Harry had spent enough time in the room to know that there was only one chair, and it was pretty worn down. He reached into his robes and conjured a stick of wood baring an uncanny resemblance to his wand. After a moment's indecision, he conjured one over-sized armchair that would comfortably seat the two of them. Ginny smiled at his choice and happily took a seat. He sunk down next to her, slipping an arm around her shoulder in the process. Harry smiled at her and gave her a quick peck on the lips before turning back to the twins.

They were watching the two of them. "Well that's a neat trick," Fred commented.

Harry quirked his eyebrow in lieu of asking the obvious question.

"The chair," George answered.

"It's called magic," Harry explained.

"You perform it with a magic wand," Ginny helpfully inserted.

"Now, the wand may just look like a stick of wood, but there is actually a magical core inside," Harry continued.

"It helps to focus the magic," Ginny once again interjected.

"Har har," Fred interrupted.

"What we mean is..."

"Where did you learn to conjure like that?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You'd be surprised what you could learn if you only paid attention."

"I'm pretty sure McGonagall never covered anything like that in our class," George responded.

"Perhaps had you shown the skill for it, she would have pushed you to bigger and better things," Harry commented.

"Are you going to give us a show? Or did you come to sign up for lessons with Harry?" Ginny interjected. "He has a pretty busy schedule, you know. The life of an Assistant Professor is not an easy one. You'll probably have to wait at least until the summer before he'll be able to fit you in."

“If he didn’t spend so much time snogging our lovely sister,” Fred retorted.

“He might have a bit of time for some extra lessons.”

“Sorry guys,” Harry put in. “The snogging time stays.”

They simultaneously shrugged while Fred input, “It was worth a shot.”

Harry rolled his eyes but refrained from commenting further.

George reached his hand into the bag and seemed to pull something out, though Harry could not see what. “Now,” he said. “Feast your eyes on this...”

OoOoO

After the twins’ demonstration, they made it back to the common room well before curfew. Ron and Hermione left for a prefect meeting just as Harry and Ginny arrived. Harry bid them a good time, and Ron grouched sourly. Hermione insisted that it would be interesting as the two of them stepped out of the portrait hole. Hermione glanced over her shoulder one last time and connected eyes with Harry for just a moment before the portrait shut. He found himself perplexed at the look she had given him but quickly shook the matter out of his mind.

“Hey, Neville, how about a game of Exploding Snap?” Harry asked as he sat in a chair across from the boy. Neville lowered the textbook he had been reading and nodded his head agreeably.

“Sounds great. This stuff was putting me to sleep.”

Harry smiled then turned to Ginny who was only a metre away. “What about you, Gin? Interested?”

She hesitated a second before shaking her head. “No thanks, I think I’m going to go over and see what’s going on with my dorm mates. They look like they’re up to something.”

“Suit yourself,” Harry said as he turned back to Neville. He followed Ginny’s progress with his eyes as she walked over to her friends.

“You two have been spending an awful lot of time together,” Neville commented offhandedly.

Harry’s eyes snapped away from Ginny’s backside and landed on Neville. He shrugged his shoulders. “She’s good company.”

Neville smiled a bit devilishly. “I’ll bet,” he said with a suggestive lilt to his voice. Then, abruptly, he dropped the tone, “You want to go first or should I?”

“Go ahead,” Harry said, feeling a bit disoriented. After Neville placed his card, Harry followed up with his own. As Neville was considering his next move, Harry asked, “So do you have any big plans for next weekend?”

“Not really,” Neville answered a bit distractedly as he made his move. “I – well, I – that is –“

“You’d like to spend the day with Hannah, but you haven’t found the nerve to ask her yet?” Harry offered as he played his own card.

“Is it that obvious?” Neville asked a bit glumly.

“What other reason could there be for your indecision or nervousness?” Harry queried. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

Neville nodded his head and played another card without responding. “You should just ask her, you know,” Harry stated.

“But what if she says no? What if she’d rather just be friends?” Neville asked, flustered.

“You’ll never know until you ask,” Harry responded. “If you don’t ask, you’ll be miserable wondering what could have been. At least if you ask you’ll have a chance at being happy.” Harry smirked at his friend as he placed another card. It was funny how similar the situations

were. First Remus and Tonks, then he and Ginny, he had just given the same advice to Hermione, and now he was feeding it to Neville. It made Harry feel distinctly normal, and he rather liked the feeling.

“What about you?” Neville retorted. “What are your plans for next weekend?”

“Good question,” Harry answered ponderingly. “I guess I just assumed I’d be spending the day with Ginny, but I never actually asked her. I’ll ask her later tonight.”

“What’s going on with you two?” Neville asked. “It’s clear you like each other, but I can’t tell if you’ve done anything about it. You act the same as you always have, yet something about you seems different.” It was Neville’s turn to play, but he had paused his actions as he waited for Harry’s answer.

Harry took a moment to ponder over his response. He and Ginny had not really talked about what they would tell their friends. Neither one made a move to tell others except in the case of Remus and Fred and George, and in those cases they had sought the other’s permission first. Ginny was not around to ask this time, and he could not just pretend he had not heard the question. In the end, he decided that Neville deserved an honest answer. He would let Ginny know about it later and just hope that she agreed with him, and he would ask Neville to keep it a secret until they were ready to let their relationship be known.

“We’ve been dating for a couple weeks now,” Harry informed his friend. “We just didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. We’ll probably tell everyone eventually, but for now can you not let on that you know anything?”

Neville smirked at him. “Sure; no problem. I’m glad you two are together; you just seem like you belong together.”

Harry smiled widely. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Thanks.” They each played a couple turns in silence before Harry spoke up again. “You know, I think if you asked, she’d say yes.”

Neville paused his move as he looked up at Harry. "Why do you say that?"

"When we danced at the ball," Harry said. "She didn't come right out and say it, but I got the impression that she was interested."

"Really? You think so?" Neville asked hopefully.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Give it a shot, mate. Trust me when I say that it is worth the risk."

"Thanks, Harry," Neville said after playing his next turn. "I think maybe I'll ask her tomorrow."

"That's great," Harry encouraged, placing his own card. As soon as his fingers let go of the card it exploded. Luckily, he was already pulling back and avoided most of the explosion. "Well, that's game to you. Want to go again?"

"Sure," Neville replied.

When they were well into their third game – they could not stop with the score split between them – Ron and Hermione came back through the portrait hole, each wearing a wide grin. Neville was the first to notice them and had to point Harry towards them as his back was to the exit. Given the fact that he already had Valentine's Day and next weekend's Hogsmeade trip on the brain, Harry quickly made the connection to his conversation with Hermione the previous weekend. If he was not mistaken, she had finally worked up the nerve to ask Ron to go with her.

"Merlin, it's finally happened," Harry muttered.

"You don't think...?" Neville began. "No, it couldn't be. Could it?"

"Hermione came to me about a week ago to talk about Ron," Harry explained, turning back to Neville. "I think she finally made up her mind and asked him."

Neville's gaze alternated between the couple and Harry for a long moment before he shook his head. "I guess I always figured it would happen eventually," he said. "Yet I never thought it would happen, you know?"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, I know. It was inevitable, yet they're both so stubborn it felt like they'd never get there."

"Exactly," Neville agreed with a smile. "Well, if Hermione can do it, so can I."

"That's the spirit," Harry encouraged.

They returned to their game after that. Neville ended up pulling away with the deciding victory. Though he put up a show of being disgruntled over the loss, Harry really did not mind. He would have preferred to win, of course – there was no point playing if you were not at least trying to win – but he had fun all the same.

Harry managed to ask Ginny about the Hogsmeade trip later that evening. She told him that of course she would spend the day with him and that he was silly for thinking he had to ask. After all, if he was planning on spending Valentine's Day with anyone but her, he would be in for a world of pain.

She also agreed to the lunch date with Neville and Hannah, so Harry made sure to inform his friend when they retired for the night. Ron came strolling into the room with a stupid grin still attached to his face shortly thereafter where he informed them all that he would be spending his time in Hogsmeade with Hermione – alone. He did not inquire as to any of their plans, and neither he nor Neville chose to speak up.

As Harry changed into his night clothes, he wondered what Ron's reaction would be when he found out. He felt a little bad about hiding their relationship from Ron, but he was not ready to share it with him yet. But Ron would have to be told eventually. Harry put the matter out of his mind, not wanting to worry about what could happen. No

matter Ron's reaction, it would not change his relationship with Ginny, and in the end, that was all that truly mattered.

OoOoO

Harry called the training dummies to a halt and wiped the sweat from his brow. He took a moment to catch his breath and glanced over at Ginny. She was working diligently on her wandless magic. She was not catching on quite as quickly as he had, but she was making progress. Harry was convinced that she had the talent to use wandless magic as effortlessly as he now did, so long as she kept at it. Ginny had told him all about the incendiary spell she had unconsciously cast while he was off battling Death Eaters. She clearly had the ability since that had not been uncontrolled, accidental magic. Even if she had not cast the spell consciously, she was still able to control the spell.

Now, however, she was back to performing simple spells and had to struggle for control. She also wore a rather determined look on her face as she extended her arm and summoned a thick tome. The book started to move slowly and shakily but picked up speed suddenly. She yelped and ducked as the book continued on in its momentum, falling to the ground a good 10 or 15 metres past her. She cursed loudly as she turned and closed the distance to the book, kicking it across the floor in frustration.

"You really shouldn't blame the book," Harry commented as he walked towards her.

"Why not?" Ginny demanded as she whirled around to face him.

"Because it's not the book's fault. It was your magic that made it nearly take your head off," he answered stoically.

"Yeah, well," Ginny huffed in annoyance. "It's easier to blame the book," she finished in a mutter.

"Easier, yes," Harry said with a chuckle. "But that doesn't make it right."

“I just don’t understand how I could cast such a powerful spell one night, and now I’m struggling with this simple stuff,” she edged out in frustration.

“Think of your magic like a muscle,” Harry explained. “Your muscle has a certain limit to what it can do, but with training you can strengthen the muscle so that it can handle more on a regular basis.”

“I understand that,” Ginny interrupted, “but that’s totally different...”

Harry held up his hand to quell Ginny’s outburst. “If you let me finish, perhaps you would see what I’m talking about.” He waited until she nodded her head before continuing. “When a person is under duress, sometimes a jolt of adrenaline can allow that person to perform extraordinary feats they would not ordinarily be able to accomplish.”

“Wait, what’s adrenaline?” Ginny asked.

Harry was brought up short by the question. Truth be told, he did not know all that much on the topic, but he thought he could explain it well enough. “It’s a chemical produced by the body when you are either especially physically active or when you are in a moment of duress or panic. There have been reports of people doing amazing things thanks to the adrenaline their body has produced in a crisis, like lifting up something really heavy to save a child or loved one or something. Normally they would not have been strong enough to do it, but thanks to the adrenaline, they could. If they went back the next day outside of that stressful situation, they’d find that they could not perform the same feat.”

Harry stopped his explanation to gauge how Ginny was taking it. He hoped he had explained it sufficiently and wanted to see what she made of his explanation. She bit her lip with her head slightly downcast as she thought it over, and Harry found the action rather distracting. Finally, she looked up at him and tentatively reasoned out, “So you’re saying that because I was worried about you, I had adrenaline pumping through me, which allowed me to do something I wouldn’t normally be able to do?”

“Yes, I think so,” Harry said, happy that the message had been relayed clearly. Ginny, however, did not look so pleased.

“So you’re saying I won’t be able to cast magic like that except in those types of circumstances?” she asked him.

“No,” Harry backpedalled. “No, what I’m saying is that you did something your body is not currently conditioned to handle. It’s something your body is capable of, obviously, since you managed to do it, but if you want to be able to do it regularly, you have to keep training to build up your magic muscle or whatever you want to call it.”

She nodded her head in acceptance of his explanation. “I guess that’s my cue to get back to work,” she said.

“Actually,” Harry responded, “I want you to switch over to the dummies for a while.” For several minutes Harry just watched Ginny get put through her paces before he shook himself to attention and went back to his own training. Having a partner could be very distracting, especially when all he really wanted to do was take her aside and snog her senseless, but he refused to allow his hormones to get in the way of his training. There would be time for snogging later.

After their training, they had time to grab a quick, light meal before heading out to the Quidditch pitch for practice. Even despite his limited interaction with his teammates during the practice, Harry could tell that things were not going too well. He could hear Ron’s voice growing more frustrated and exasperated as the time went on. When the practice was over, Harry inconspicuously let Ginny know not to wait for him and took his time getting cleaned up and dressed back in his normal clothes. He and Ron had made a habit of talking after practices last term, and Harry figured it would be a good idea to start the custom up again.

The changing room eventually cleared of everyone but the two of them, and it was a short minute after the last person had left when Ron asked him, “So what did you think?”

Harry glanced up from tying his shoes to see Ron pulling his normal robes over his head and mulled over the question over for a moment. "I think it went okay. It could have been much better, but they were bound to be rusty. It was our first practice of the term after all; some of them probably haven't been on a broom in two months."

"That's true," Ron conceded.

"Besides, we have plenty of time to get back into rhythm before our first game. Give it a week or two before you start worrying about it. If you get on them too soon, it may put them off a bit," Harry continued.

"I don't want them to get complacent," Ron answered, shutting the door of his locker.

"Well, you don't have to blow smoke up their arses," Harry responded. "Let them know exactly what you think, that they're rusty. We'll tell them that while we understand that it's unavoidable, we expect them to be back on form in a week; otherwise we will crack down on them."

"You think that will work?" Ron asked doubtfully as he sank down onto the opposite bench.

Harry finished tying his shoe before looking back up and answering. "It's all about balance. They have to want to play for you, so you can't be too hard on them. But you need them to respect you, so you can't just let them do whatever they want either."

"But how do you know which one is the right way to handle the situation?" Ron inquired. He was leaning forward with his hands on his knees, and Harry could tell he was very interested in the conversation. That was not an odd occurrence when the conversation revolved around Quidditch, but in this case it was only loosely so.

"It's not always easy to tell," Harry responded thoughtfully. In truth he had never really thought about it. He tended to just follow his instincts. "You have to try to understand where they're coming from."

In this case, it wasn't that they were goofing off or dogging it. They were trying but were just too rusty to play on top of their games, and I'm sure they know that without being told. That's when you need to offer encouragement to try to help them get better. If you think that they're playing poorly because they aren't concentrating or are just goofing off or whatever, that's when you need to get on their cases."

Ron was silent for a long moment following his statement, so Harry used the time to hang his Quidditch robe in the locker and shut the door.

"It's not easy for you, is it?" Ron's voice permeated through the quiet. Harry turned around to look at his friend, wondering what he was talking about. "Being a professor and a student," Ron clarified.

"No, not really," Harry answered, a bit surprised at the question. "It's not so bad usually, but there are times when it gets tough. It's hard to be a friend one minute and an authority the next, and I always have to second guess myself. Am I being too lenient because I'm their friend? Or am I being too hard on them? I usually don't have the time to really think about in that moment, but afterwards I often question myself."

"I suppose we don't always make it easy on you," Ron sheepishly admitted.

"Not always, no," Harry said. He found himself at a loss. It was unlike Ron to dwell on something like this. You were lucky to get even a weak apology out of him, and afterwards he seemed to forget the matter ever happened. When Ron had acted out in class, he had been angry and upset at Harry for putting a stop to him. He had eventually got over his anger and went on to pretend like nothing was wrong – never actually considering the position he had put Harry in.

When Harry had brought the matter back up in his confrontation with Ron following the Quidditch match last fall, he had not known exactly what he expected, but he certainly did not expect the matter to still be on Ron's mind several months down the line. Perhaps he had made more of an impact than he knew.

“I’m glad you’re back on the team,” Ron said as he stood up.

Harry followed suit, rising from the bench. “Me too, mate. Me too.” It was not quite an apology, but he found he did not really need to hear the words. After all, he could not expect Ron to completely change overnight. For now it was enough to know that Ron recognised the tough position he had put Harry in.

The next few days crawled by at a flobberworm’s pace as anticipation for Valentine’s Day and the Hogsmeade trip escalated. Harry took advantage of the preoccupation of his friends to sneak out of the castle. He wanted to get Ginny a gift, but he had no idea where to even start. Even if he wanted to, he could not go to Hermione or any of the other girls in Hogwarts because it would be too difficult to explain how he would get the gift.

He briefly thought of contacting Jessica for help but quickly thought better of it. It would be a little weird to go to her for help buying a gift for another woman. And besides, it would be rather difficult to explain why he was back in London. He did remember seeing a couple shops that he thought might work while walking with Jessica near her department store, so that is where he set off to find Ginny’s gift.

After a quick stop to change some galleons into pounds, Harry wandered into a Muggle jewellery store, thinking over what he wanted to buy. He was wary of getting a ring as he did not want her to get the wrong idea, so he had decided on a bracelet, a necklace, or earrings. After looking through all the display counters, Harry felt his head spinning at the wide selection. Luckily, a friendly old man behind the counter approached him asking if he needed some assistance.

Harry explained his predicament to the man who smiled back in a kindly way. He showed Harry several selections that he said were popular with the younger generation, and from there Harry was able to pick out a pair of gold earrings.

He made the purchase, thanked the man for his help, and quickly made his way back to the castle. He had little fear of getting caught by anyone except Ginny, but he wanted to keep his gift a surprise

from her until Valentine's Day. The rest of the week was practically torture with how slowly the days seemed to pass by.

When the weekend finally arrived, Harry was filled with a sense of both relief and excitement as he was finally making his way into the Wizarding village. It had felt as though the weekend would never come, yet here it was. As a chilly breeze sent a shiver down his spine, Harry called up his magic to warm himself. He let the magic flow into Ginny, and she sent an appreciative smile over her shoulder in thanks.

As they walked Harry reflected on this time last year. He had been walking down the same beaten path to the town of Hogsmeade beside a girl he thought he had fallen head over heels for. At the time he had found himself feeling awkward and uncomfortable, struggling to find some common ground with a girl he hardly knew. A year ago Harry was walking down the path to disaster.

That was the great thing about this year and this Valentine's Day. At his side was a girl he was quite certain he had fallen - was still falling - head over heels for. Thinking back on it, Harry found his behaviour the previous year rather silly. He had not even known Cho, so what exactly was it that he had fallen for? Ginny, however, he knew quite well, and it seemed like the more he learned about her, the more he liked her. As they walked along the trodden path, there was no struggle to find common ground or a topic of conversation, and the silences were not at all awkward or uncomfortable. The fact that they did not need to keep a constant stream of conversation going was testament to how comfortable they were with each other. Their relationship was easy and natural.

They made it into the town amidst the crowd of students without a real destination in mind. Harry turned to Ginny and asked what she wanted to do.

"I could go for a cup of tea, I think," she replied. "Can we go to Madame Puddifoot's?"

Harry stared at her in abject horror at the very notion. He had never been there at any time of the year beside Valentine's Day. He was

aware that the place may not always be as horrible as it had been on his one visit with Cho, but since it was Valentine's Day again, the shop was likely to be set up similarly if not identically to last year. He could not believe Ginny would even want to go there. Then it hit him. Ginny would not want to go there; she was only having him on.

"Ha ha," he said. "Very funny."

She smiled winningly at him in return. "The look on your face was priceless."

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up," Harry replied. "You think it's funny, but I don't think I could even kiss you now, not with that scene playing in my head the way it is now."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic," Ginny scoffed.

He stuck his tongue out at her in mock anger.

"Careful, Mr. Potter," Ginny warned. "I've been known to bite." Her voice had taken on a suggestive lilt, and she winked at him as she finished.

"Just don't bite too hard, and I think we'll be okay. In fact," Harry quipped, "I think I might just enjoy that."

"Keep dreaming Potter," Ginny said, giving him a playful shove.

Harry moved as if to shove her right back but instead pulled her in for a quick peck on her lips. Pulling back, he slipped his arm around her shoulders, and the two wandered through the main street of town. They mostly just looked into the windows but entered a couple shops as well. Neither one of them had any purchases they needed to make, so they were content just to enjoy the stroll through town until it was time for lunch.

As lunch-time approached, they entered the Three Broomsticks to find Neville and Hannah already sitting in a booth along the wall. Harry waved as they approached the table and slid into the seat after

Ginny. As they exchanged greetings, Ginny pulled his hand off his lap and interlaced her fingers with his. He turned and smiled at the same time as Ginny.

“Ginny, I love your earrings,” Hannah commented excitedly.

Harry spun towards her in surprise wondering how she could have spotted Ginny’s earrings so easily. He glanced at Ginny who gave him a smug, ‘I told you so’ look. And she had told him so. Unable to wait any longer, Harry had given her the earrings that morning. After thanking him profusely, she had warned him that if she wore the jewellery someone was bound to notice and comment on them. Harry had shrugged his shoulders deciding it was not worth worrying over. People were bound to find out eventually.

“Thanks; Harry gave them to me,” she replied.

As both heads across the table turned to look at him, Harry felt heat creeping up his neck and into his cheeks.

“They’re beautiful,” Hannah continued. “I must say you have good taste.”

“Err – uh – thanks,” Harry responded uncomfortably.

Ginny nudged him in the side with her elbow. “Oh quit acting all shy,” she teasingly reprimanded.

He looked up at her and smiled, realising that he was being a bit silly about the whole thing. He was just unused to everything about the situation. His relationship with Ginny was still so new, and so few people knew about it that the topic never came up. It would just take him a bit to grow accustomed to people knowing how he felt, he supposed.

“So, how are you two enjoying your date?” Harry asked, trying to get the spotlight off of himself.

Sure enough, a blush spread across Neville's cheeks, and Hannah ducked her head shyly as she mumbled something he could not quite catch.

"Okay, so you're not the only shy one here," Ginny input with levity. "Feel better about yourself now?"

"Yes, actually," Harry retorted. "Much better."

Madame Rosmerta interrupted to take their orders, and they settled into an easy conversation once she had wandered off. Harry refrained from falling back into the flirtatious routine he and Rosmerta had established in the previous term. He thought it would be disrespectful to Ginny to flirt with another woman while on a date with her – even if it was only in jest. Harry was a bit surprised when Rosmerta made no move to flirt with him or Neville, but then, maybe she realised that they were on dates and did not want to risk upsetting the girls.

The conversation turned to the HA and eventually to the war. Hannah was interested in hearing what Harry, in particular, thought about everything. He supposed it made sense that she would look to him since he was the only one in a position of authority who openly talked about it and who was trying to give them tools to deal with the situation. Harry chose for bluntness in his response.

"Basically, the Ministry was and is woefully unprepared to deal with the situation. Fudge not only wasted a full year of preparation, he allowed Voldemort to have free reign to build up his strength. The only people who actively worked against Voldemort in that time were Dumbledore and his supporters, and they did little more than gather information and work to impede and slow Voldemort down. As far as I can tell, they never actually worked to capture any Death Eaters or do anything openly constructive to put a dent in Voldemort's forces."

"Now granted," Harry continued after pausing to take a sip of butterbeer, "if they had caught any Death Eaters, Fudge would have just let them go as soon as they were turned over to the Ministry. From what I've seen, the Ministry Aurors seem under-trained for this

sort of conflict and too few in numbers to pose any real threat to Voldemort's forces. Dumbledore's group is not any better off. Right now, all anyone seems to be trying to do is minimise the damage being done, and they're doing a pretty shoddy job of even that."

The table was silent for a long moment following his statement. The prospects did not look good, and it was a hard truth to swallow. Hannah finally broke the silence saying, "I heard they were able to stop an attack on Madame Bones a little while back. It was never in the papers, but Susan Bones got a letter from her aunt about it."

Harry shared a quick look with Ginny before turning his attention back to Hannah. "Did she mention any specifics about the attack or who it was that stopped it?"

"No," Hannah replied, shaking her head. "No, just that there was an attack at her home, but they caught word of it beforehand and were able to put a stop to it. So that's promising, right? I mean, if they not only learned of the attack but were also able to stop it, they're at least doing something right."

Harry was not sure how to respond to her. He glanced over at Neville to see his elbows on the table, hands clasped under his chin as he waited for Harry's reply. Hannah bore a hopeful expression on her face as if seeking some comfort from his response. He felt Ginny's hand rub comfortingly on his leg as he mulled things over. He wanted to give them some comfort, but at the same time he did not want to lie or give them false hope.

"Well, I reckon that's true," Harry finally answered. "It's only one small victory, but it shows that there are at least some who are capable of stopping the Death Eaters. If they can continue to win those small battles, we may be able to wear down their forces."

Madame Rosmerta arrived with their orders, and the conversation turned back to lighter topics as they all enjoyed the meal. After they had finished and paid, Neville asked if they would like to get some dessert at a new ice cream parlour that was having its grand opening

that weekend. Harry glanced at Ginny, and, after exchanging a quick look, she quickly agreed.

Harry and Ginny decided to split a relatively simple sundae with vanilla ice cream, strawberries, and hot fudge. The only thing magical about the dish was that the hot fudge was charmed to stay hot and yet not cause the ice cream to melt any more quickly than it normally would. Harry did not pay particular attention to what Neville and Hannah ordered except to note that they each got their own separate dish, although he did notice them sharing.

After the delicious desserts, Harry and Ginny parted ways with Neville and Hannah. As they exited the ice cream parlour, Harry noticed Ron and Hermione entering the Three Broomsticks hand-in-hand. The sight brought a smirk to his lips even if it was also a bit disconcerting. Their new relationship would take some getting used to.

He took Ginny's hand and led her away from the main town, past a couple blocks of houses to the outskirts of the town near where he always Apparated in and out of the town. Nearby was a knoll partially secluded by a row of trees. Harry retrieved his wand from his holster for show and conjured a large blanket on the grass. "If you don't mind, I thought we'd just lie down together for a bit."

She smiled warmly at him and rose onto her toes to give him a peck on the lips. "That sounds lovely."

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Ginny lowered herself down onto the blanket, followed closely by Harry. She stretched out on her side facing Harry. When he did the same, she asked him, "So what are we doing here?"

He smiled coyly as he replied, "Oh I don't know, enjoying the view."

"The view, huh?" she asked. Ginny turned her head to take a good look at the scenery. It was pretty enough, she supposed. The grass was a lush green. The clearing held a few scattered trees, and the forest was thin enough here that it was much more inviting than the line of trees lining Hogwarts' grounds. As she turned back, she found

Harry still facing her. His were cast slightly downward and lingered for a moment before rising to meet her gaze. "Are you enjoying the view?" she asked boldly.

His eyes lazily flicked down again before slowly rising to her face. Ginny could feel heat rush to her cheeks at his scrutiny. He smirked at her coyly as he responded, "Very much." His hand reached out to cup her cheek; Ginny needed no further invitation. She leaned in and captured his lips with her own. Harry's hand lingered on her cheek for several moments before moving into her hair and finally to her back. He pulled her body into his, closing what little space lay between them. It was almost intoxicating – the kiss, the feel of his body pressed against hers – she could very easily lose herself.

Eventually she broke the kiss and rested her forehead against his, the tips of their noses just barely touching. Harry's eyes twinkled at her as he began to rub his nose back and forth across hers. She could not help a small giggle at the sensation. As her eyes met his, it was suddenly driven home just how far he had come. She could remember when he was uncomfortable with just small acts of affection, yet now here he was acting overtly affectionate with her. Kissing was one thing as it was largely fuelled by desire and lust, but the simple act of rubbing his nose against hers or just holding her there meant much more, in its own way. It was not driven by desire or hormones but genuine affection. The knowledge caused a warm feeling of comfort to spread throughout her body.

She slid her head down to rest in the crook of his neck as they lay there together. His hand was gently stroking her hair; it was such a calm and soothing action. She had no idea how long they laid there like that as the action was so relaxing that she soon felt her eyes drifting shut of their own accord. What felt like mere moments later, she was jarred to awareness when Harry stiffened beneath her. His hand left her hair abruptly, and she was suddenly wide awake.

She lifted her head to look up at him and found his face scrunched up in pain, his eyes clamped shut, and his hand pressed against his scar. She wrapped her arm around his shoulder and held him tightly, tucking her head down to the side of his. She began whispering into his ear, telling him that it would be okay, that she had him. Her other

hand wound its way into his hair as she continued to whisper soothingly. She had no idea whether or not he could hear her, but if it afforded him even some small comfort it was worth the effort.

It was several minutes later that Harry jerked back into awareness. He was breathing heavily but did not have the drastic reaction he had had the last time she was with him during the throes of a vision. She just held him tightly and was relieved when he immediately squeezed her back. They stayed that way for a couple minutes, locked in a tight embrace before Harry whispered into her ears, "We need to go. I have to talk to Dumbledore."

She nodded to Harry and stood up beside him. She was just about to collect the blanket when she remembered that Harry had conjured it. She reminded him to vanish it, and they set off at a brisk walk back towards the castle. They were both quiet as they were each lost in their thoughts. Ginny could only assume he was thinking about his vision. She was curious as to what he had seen but thought better of asking him about it now. She would wait until they were in private.

Instead, she found her thoughts focusing on Voldemort and the war that was brewing in the Wizarding World. She was always aware that it was going on, of course, but within the safety of Hogwarts, it was easy to forget just how real it all was – even with all the training she was doing. It was Harry's involvement that brought it all bearing down on her, as it was now. When it was just she and Harry together in a private moment like that, it was easy to forget everything else, yet she knew that would not be the last time Voldemort came between them. She knew they could not truly have normal lives, be a normal couple, until Voldemort was defeated.

As they were walking into the entrance hall, Harry grabbed and squeezed her hand lightly. "I should probably talk to Dumbledore alone," he said, looking into her eyes.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same," she responded softly. She leaned up to give him a peck on the cheek. "I'll wait for you in your office."

He smiled down at her softly. "Thanks, Gin." And then he turned and walked away. Ginny watched him go before turning and making her way to his office.

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Harry grew uncomfortable under the old wizard's speculative stare. Just when he was about to interrupt the silence, the Headmaster asked, "Are you certain this was not a false vision implanted in your mind?"

Harry had to repress a frustrated sigh. "Yes, sir, I'm positive."

"How can you be sure?" he was asked. There was not doubt in the tone, only interest and curiosity.

"I've been having a lot of visions lately," Harry admitted. He had avoided mentioning the visions to anyone but Ginny. There was nothing that could be done for them, and he hardly felt like concentrating on them any more than necessary. And he really did not want to deal with any unnecessary questions. "He's been participating in attacks more often lately," he offered by way of explanation.

"I see," Dumbledore replied, steepling his fingers underneath his chin. "And you have come to some understanding of the visions as a result?"

"You could say that, I guess," Harry stated. He paused as he formulated his response. "Voldemort doesn't seem to have as much control over our link as he thinks. I noticed that he only became aware of my presence when I had strong reactions to what was happening at the time."

"Indeed?" the Headmaster asked with obvious interest.

"Since I made that discovery, I've learned to temper my reactions to avoid notice. I was hoping that he might give away information while I was there that could help put stop to future attacks," Harry continued.

“Before today, I had not been made privy to anything useful. I only caught him during attacks.”

“Have you considered the fact that if you can spy on him unnoticed, he may be able to do the same to you?” the Headmaster questioned.

Harry’s previous thoughts derailed. Truth be told, he had never given any consideration to that thought. Something in his gut told him that it could not be true, but he could not deny the validity of the thought. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he stated neutrally. “Though I would think that my scar would give me some indication of his presence,” he added as the thought formed in his mind. “It always hurts when he’s near, whether physically or – erm – mentally.”

“Did your scar bother you during your dreams of the Department of Mysteries last year?” Dumbledore inquired.

“No,” Harry answered uneasily as he thought back on it. “I suppose it didn’t.” He paused for a moment before another thought jumped into his mind. “But then, Voldemort didn’t have to be in my head for that, did he? He just had to send along a vision or dream or whatever you want to call it.”

The Headmaster nodded his head. “Yes, I see your point. We shall just have to hope you are correct on that point – at least for now. In the meantime, let us assume, for the moment, that your vision was, in fact, legitimate. Can you remember anything that would give indication as to what exactly they were referring to?”

Harry shook his head hopelessly. “No, sir, that’s just the thing. They never said anything specific – at least not while I was there. They only said that they had a person in place, and when Voldemort asked if they ran into any trouble getting inside, the Death Eater responded that nobody had suspected a thing. They had been able to make it inside without any trouble or undue notice. Voldemort was pleased and said that they only need wait for a signal that the wards had been breached. Then they could...” Harry paused as he struggled to remember the exact wording, “cripple their enemies in such a way that they could not recover.”

They were both quiet for a long moment as they each thought over the information. Harry found himself frustrated that he had not been witness to more than just those brief couple minutes. At the same time he realised the ridiculousness of that thought as he wanted nothing more than for the vision to end as soon as it began. But still, if the information could help him save lives, he would have gladly borne the additional agony.

“Unfortunately, they could be referring to virtually anything,” Dumbledore finally said with a short sigh. “The Ministry, the Order...” he left the statement hanging there for a moment. “All we can do is be extra vigilant until we determine the exact nature of the threat.”

Harry nodded his head in defeat. In truth, the conclusion was not at all unexpected. He had hoped that the Headmaster might have some other information that, tied with his, would give them some answers. Then again, there was no guarantee he would even share that information with Harry if he did have it.

“Please let me know if you have any more visions that might have any connection to this.”

Harry nodded his head. “I will, sir.”

“Good,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Now, I want you to forget all about Voldemort for the rest of the day. It is Valentine’s Day after all, and if I’m not mistaken, the young Miss Weasley is likely to be eagerly awaiting your return.”

Harry felt his mouth drop open as he looked at the Headmaster.

“Come now,” Dumbledore continued with a light chuckle. “You did not expect something like a new girlfriend to escape detection for long, did you?”

Harry shook his head. “No. I’m just surprised you noticed, is all. Most of our friends don’t even know yet.”

“We often find ourselves too caught up in our own affairs to perceive the things that don’t directly concern us,” Dumbledore responded. “Especially in ones so young, and especially when they have their thoughts focused on other things.”

Harry smiled in response. “I guess you’re probably right. I’ll just be getting back to Ginny then.”

Dumbledore smiled warmly at him. “I hope you are able to enjoy the rest of your date in peace.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry replied as he waved goodbye to the Headmaster. He wasted little time exiting the office and making his way up to his office. After all, he did have a date to finish, and he had one last surprise in store for her.

OoOoO

The next morning, Harry was just dropping from his pull-up bar when Ginny’s voice asked, “Is there anything you can’t do?”

Harry had to think about the abrupt question for a moment just to make sense of it. Even then he had no idea what she was talking about. “What?”

“I just can’t get over the fact that you can cook too,” she responded. “I was thinking about it last night, and, I mean, it wasn’t one of Mum’s dinners, but it was still really good. So I got to thinking about it, and I was wondering if there was anything you’re not good at.”

Harry ducked his head down at the compliment. He did not think he was that good at a lot of things. He was pretty good at Quidditch, he reckoned. And over the past year he had become rather adept in several different branches of magic. He thought his cooking was okay – nothing to get worked up over. He had bought himself a couple cook books over the summer and had experimented with some meals in his trunk, but he did not imagine himself to be that much of a chef.

“I’m not –“ Harry started to respond.

“Harry,” Ginny interrupted a bit impatiently. “Don’t even try to tell me you’re not good at that many things. Name me one thing you’re bad at because I can’t think of anything.”

“Cricket,” Harry said, naming the first thing that came to mind. Back in Muggle primary school they had played the game in their physical education classes, and he had been absolutely horrible at it.

“What the hell is cricket?” she blurted back.

“Muggle sport,” he explained succinctly.

“Well that doesn’t count then,” Ginny determined.

“Why not?”

“Because I have no idea what that even is,” she insisted.

“Alright,” Harry replied. “How about Arithmancy.”

“You don’t even take Arithmancy,” she responded back with annoyance in her voice.

“Exactly why I wouldn’t be any good at it,” Harry shot back triumphantly.

She just shook her head at him. “Doesn’t count.”

“Fine,” he said as he wracked his brain for something else. He finally locked onto one that he knew she could not disagree with. “Okay, how about this then? I can’t take a compliment.”

She looked at him blankly for a second before her eyes narrowed. He just smirked at her. “It’s true,” he insisted. “You tell me so all the time.”

“That doesn’t count either,” she declared.

“Well of course I’m going to be good at everything if nothing I’m bad at counts,” Harry said.

“Whatever,” she harrumphed, crossing her arms over her chest. When he continued to smirk at her, she stuck her tongue out at him.

He motioned as if to try to bite her tongue and ended up kissing her instead.

As they broke apart, she smirked at him mischievously. “That’s okay. I just found something you’re not good at,” she teased.

“Hey!” Harry protested in mock outrage. He knew she was joking, but a part of him wondered if there could be a kernel of truth to her statement. After all, before Ginny he had only had one proper kiss – he did not count the one with Cho – and it was a short one at that. “If I’m no good at it, why do you want to kiss me all the time?” he demanded.

Ginny smirked at him. “Because practice makes perfect.”

A sly smirk formed on his lips as he replied, “Well if I’m so horrible, we might need to practice more often.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Ginny replied in a sultry tone as her arms snaked behind Harry’s neck.

When they finally broke apart several minutes later, it took Harry a long moment to regain his bearings. When he glanced down at his watch, he shook off his disorientation. “We should head into the shower.” Looking back at Ginny he added, “I think I better make it a cold one.”

“Whatever for?” Ginny asked seductively as she slid her hands up his chest and along to the back of his neck. Her fingers played with the hair at the nape of his neck as she pressed her body against his and pulled him down for a lingering kiss that left Harry reeling.

Harry groaned as she pulled away. "That."

Ginny smiled at him over her shoulder as she walked into her shower room. He trailed her with his eyes, admiring the sway of her hips until she was out of sight. He then shook himself and headed off for his shower.

The cold water did the trick and allowed both Harry's mind and body to relax and function a little more normally. It was a good thing too because the last thing Harry needed was to be distracted during his BHA class later that morning. The class was settling into the new routine with the addition of the dodging exercises into every class, but, as large as the class was, he needed to be on his toes at all times just in case anything happened.

His seven advanced members of the BHA were experiencing some difficulty adjusting to the concept in their mock duels. It was one thing to have a separate exercise where dodging was the only thing they had to think about, but, when Harry put them in a real duelling scenario, they tended to revert back to old form. They would seemingly switch in and out of a dodging mentality, focusing entirely on dodging one minute then remaining static as they got back into the spell-casting mode. It was difficult for them to become accustomed to casting spells while on the move.

His IHA classes were likewise heading in new and interesting directions. He had been focusing lately on what he deemed Creative Duelling. After his last battle, Harry came to appreciate that sometimes creative thinking was the best way to handle a duel where you were either outmatched or out-positioned. You cannot defend against what you cannot predict. Come up with creative ways to dispatch an opponent that cannot be blocked by a conventional shield and you have a distinct advantage in battle.

The results of those exercises were rather startling in their variety. Harry only had a few pairs working on these duels at any given time. For one, he thought it might benefit the whole class if they could see what others were coming up with. It might serve to spark their own creativity. Also, he feared the danger that such unpredictable duels could unleash, and he wanted to be on hand should anything go awry.

Beyond that, though, he wanted to be able to see what his students would come up with. He might just be able to use some of it himself.

Later that day Harry was heading down to supper with his friends. Just as they were entering into the entrance hall, a nasally voice interrupted their progress.

“As much as I hate to admit this, even you can do better than that Potter. I mean, a Weasley? Really? Is she just that easy?”

Turning slowly, Harry had to temper his anger. He knew Draco was only trying to get a rise out of him, and he could not afford to let his emotions get the better of him. It would be just the thing Snape would use to land him in detention or, even worse, to strip him of his Professorship.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ron demanded hotly as he took a step towards Malfoy.

“I always knew you were stupid, Weasley, but even you can’t be this dense,” Malfoy remarked, locking his disbelieving gaze on Ron. After a short pause he continued, “You really have no idea, do you?” he asked with a malevolent smirk. “So Potter’s trying to keep it secret. If only you’d do the same. I almost lost my lunch yesterday when I saw you with your mudblooded whore.”

Harry was unable to catch hold of Ron before he reacted.

“Ron, no!” Hermione yelled as he rushed forward. Harry had to stop himself from wandlessly petrifying Ron which gave the boy just enough time to get a punch in on Malfoy before Harry was able to immobilise the two of them with his wand.

“Detention with Filch for the both of you,” Harry stated as he stepped forward between them. “Ron, you’ll serve tomorrow at 8:00, and Draco the same time the day after.”

“What?” Malfoy yelled, his hand frozen on his face where he had been struck. Harry could just see the skin darkening into a bruise. “You can’t give me detention!”

At the same time Ron demanded, “What are you giving me detention for? He started it.” He was slightly hunched over as he had not completely reset himself from the follow through of his punch.

Turning towards Malfoy, Harry said, “I think you’ll find that I have given you detention. If you choose not to show up, I’ll make it a week. As for you, Ron,” he continued, turning towards his friend, “While Malfoy did provoke you, you are still responsible for your own actions.”

“What is going on here?” a harsh voice demanded, talking over the end of Harry’s statement. Harry did not need to look over his shoulder to verify the source of the voice. Perfect.

“Weasley punched me, and Potter hexed me then gave me detention for it,” Malfoy claimed with a triumphant smirk.

“Is that so?” Snape asked with a sneer.

“Actually, no, it is not so,” Harry stated, turning to face the Slytherin Head of House. “Draco provoked Ron into attacking, and I immobilised them both to diffuse the situation. I gave both of them detention: Ron for attacking and Draco for instigating the confrontation.”

“Mr. Malfoy is my student,” Snape stated with a malevolent glare fixed firmly on his face. “I will decide if punishment is necessary.”

“I don’t think so,” Harry stated as calmly as possible. He wanted nothing more than to put Snape in his place but knew he needed to keep a tight rein on his emotions. He picked his words carefully as he continued, “As you were not here to witness what occurred, I think my judgment will have to suffice.”

“So you think you can just go around abusing your power, handing out detentions to members of my house as you please?” Snape demanded, taking a step closer to Harry. Snape was only a couple inches taller than Harry, so they were nearly eye to eye. “I think not. Despite what you may think, Potter, you are still just a student. And Mr. Malfoy will not be serving any detentions you assign, nor will any of my students.”

“If anyone is guilty of abusing their power here, it is you,” Harry fired back vehemently. He took a calming breath before continuing, “If you have a problem with the punishments I assigned, talk to the Headmaster. I would be more than happy to submit a memory of the events into his Pensieve for him to decide,” Harry stated. “In the meantime, I will be informing Mister Filch to expect Draco at 8:00 tomorrow evening.”

With that stated, Harry lifted the immobilisation spells he had cast and abruptly began to turn on his heel. He stopped when he saw Snape reach into his robes as he uttered, “Why you little...”

“I would be careful if I were you, Professor,” Harry interrupted as he turned to face Snape. “You wouldn’t want to cause a scene,” he paused as he shifted his gaze back and forth. “There are far too many witnesses.” He locked eyes with Snape, doing his best to ignore the vein standing out on the man’s forehead. “Besides,” Harry continued in a quieter voice, “I think you remember well what happened the last time you pulled your wand on me.”

Snape’s face twisted into an ugly visage of pure hatred as they stared each other down. They remained that way for nearly a full minute before Snape finally pulled his hand out of his robes sans wand.

“This isn’t over, Potter,” Snape spat as he turned and stormed out the doors of the Great Hall.

Harry wasted little time entering into the Great Hall and striding over to the Gryffindor table. He ignored the whispered conversations from the crowd of students that had gathered around them. His friends settled in around him a minute later. Ron seemed subdued but not

overtly angry over the encounter. It was Hermione who bore a look bordering on outrage.

“I can’t believe you talked to a Professor that way, Harry,” she admonished as she sat across from him.

“I think you’re forgetting that Harry is a Professor,” Neville interjected from Harry’s side.

Hermione continued on as if Neville had not even spoken, “You just completely undermined his authority in front of half the school,” she continued her rebuke. “And not only that, you threatened him.”

Harry slammed his hand down onto the table in frustration. “Are you really that blind?” Harry asked incredulously. “Are you really going to sit there and accuse me of undermining his authority?” He paused a moment and looked expectantly at Hermione. “Well?” he demanded when she did not speak up.

“I will admit he may have been a little out of line...” she started.

“A little?” Ginny queried from his side, disbelief evident in her tone.

Again Hermione ignored the interruption as she continued, “But he is still a Professor and deserves to be treated with respect.”

“Respect is not something freely given,” Harry stated, thinking back to his conversation with Professor McGonagall on the subject. “It is earned.”

“And as a Professor he has earned your respect,” Hermione interjected triumphantly.

“You think everyone in a position of authority deserves your respect?” Harry questioned hotly as his eyes bore into Hermione’s. “Next you’re going to tell me that I should respect Fudge because he holds the office of Minister, never mind the fact that he spent the better part of a year dragging my name through the mud because he was too cowardly to admit that Voldemort was back. Oh, and let’s not

forget the respect I should show my aunt and uncle because they are my guardians, after all; therefore, they must have earned my respect.”

Hermione flinched at the mention of his relatives, and he felt a twisted sort of pleasure at her reaction. She had a real knack for getting on his nerves lately. Ginny grasped his hand under the table and gave it a comforting squeeze. No one spoke for a long minute. Only the general noise of the crowded Great Hall kept the silence from becoming unbearable. Finally, Harry continued in a much calmer tone, “Just because a person holds a position of authority does not entitle them to your respect. They have to earn your respect by proving to you they will not abuse that power.”

Silence again descended over the group. Harry studied Hermione for a long moment and was satisfied to see she would at least consider what he had said before coming to her own conclusions.

“What happened the last time he pulled his wand on you?” Ron asked from beside Hermione, breaking the spell over the group.

Harry turned his head to survey his friend for a second. It was hard to read Ron’s emotions. He still did not seem happy over the situation, but it looked as though he would not be holding it against Harry. “I disarmed him,” Harry stated succinctly.

“You attacked a Professor?” Hermione nearly shrieked.

Several heads turned their way and listened intently for his response. Harry turned and glared at Hermione to find her staring at him in abject horror that he would do such a thing.

“Shut up, Hermione,” Neville and Ginny scolded simultaneously. The two leaned forward to look at each other around Harry, then turned their gazes almost in perfect synchronisation to Hermione, who at least had the decency to appear sheepish following her outburst. Harry released a chuckle as he shook his head, deciding to ignore the question entirely. He had just laid a lot at her feet and did

not need to be adding to it right away. You cannot expect someone to change overnight.

“So how did you disarm him?” Ron prodded a moment later, an excited gleam in his eyes.

Harry laughed again as he looked up. Shaking his head, he replied, “Another time, Ron.”

Luckily, Ron accepted his temporary avoidance of the question and let the matter drop. The meal progressed a bit more peacefully after that. Harry retired to the common room after supper to relax and play games with his friends. Hermione had declined the invitation to play and sat nearby with a book in her lap, though Harry did not think she was actually doing any reading. He was only marginally surprised when, after about an hour, Hermione stood up and interrupted their game.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for what I said earlier,” she said with her eyes locked on Harry. “I was thinking about it, and I agree that the title of professor alone does not earn someone respect. While I respect Professor Snape for his potions ability, you were right when you said he had not earned our respect as a figure of authority. That does not mean that we should show him disrespect, but I understand that you were only trying to stop him from undermining your own authority. So I’m sorry for jumping to the wrong conclusions.”

“Apology accepted,” Harry responded with a quirky smile. Then he added, “On one condition.” Hermione’s brow furrowed as Harry continued, “You put down your books and join us for a game of exploding snap.”

She smiled oddly at his request and gave in after only a perfunctory struggle. Hermione ended up playing with them until she and Ron had to leave for a prefect meeting.

OoOoO

As Ron and Hermione walked back to Gryffindor Tower from their meeting, Ron found his mind drifting back Malfoy's comments. The insinuation about Harry and his sister had not sunk in at the time, but now he could not keep from wondering about it. Finally, as they were just about to round the last turn leading to the portrait of the Fat Lady, Ron tugged on Hermione's arm.

She stopped walking and looked at him questioningly as he tried to vocalise his question. "What do you think Malfoy meant earlier?" He searched her face for the answer, and she seemed almost reluctant to respond. "You don't think that Ginny and Harry are...together, do you?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered after a moment's pause. Her voice was tentative. "They could be, and if not, I imagine it will happen sooner or later."

He was afraid of that answer. He could not exactly explain it, but just the thought of Ginny snogging a guy was enough to make him want to both retch and pound the bollocks off the offending bloke. The fact that the bloke was Harry just made the whole situation much more complicated. Harry was a decent bloke, so he knew he should not have to worry about it. But he also considered himself to be a pretty decent bloke, and, given the things that he would like to be doing with Hermione, could he really be blamed for wanting to put a stop to any guy who might be thinking along similar lines with Ginny?

"You know," Hermione interrupted his thoughts. "You'll have to get used to her dating sooner or later, and can you honestly think of anyone else you can trust with her more than Harry?"

"No," Ron grudgingly admitted, and it was true. He could not think of a guy he trusted more than Harry to be with his sister, but it was hardly consolation. The point was that he did not trust any guy with his sister.

"What are you so worried about?" Hermione questioned.

“Every guy wants the same thing, Hermione,” Ron blurted out. After he had said it he wished he had not and looked down at his trainers to avoid seeing Hermione’s reaction.

“Oh? And what might that be?” she queried with a distinct edge to her voice.

Ron sighed as he looked up to meet her gaze. He knew he was standing on thin ice and must tread carefully. “Guys think about girls in ways that I don’t want anybody thinking about Ginny. And just thinking about any bloke trying to do that with Ginny...” Ron’s voice progressively rose before he cut off, unwilling to finish that thought.

“Ginny’s not a defenceless little girl,” Hermione stated. Ron was tempted to roll his eyes but thought better of it. “She is more than capable of making her own decisions and looking after herself, and the more you try to interfere, the more she’ll come to resent you for it.”

“I know Ginny can take care of herself,” Ron replied. “It’s the things she might want to do with the blokes that I’m worried about.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” Hermione reprimanded.

“I know that!” Ron exclaimed, running his hands through his hair in frustration. “I just can’t help it. She’s my little sister, and I do not want to see or even think of her with anyone.”

“You are such a misguided hypocrite,” Hermione bit out in frustration. “Ginny’s virtue must be protected, yet you could care less about the virtue of any other girl. What you seem to be forgetting,” she lectured, “is that Ginny is a person. She’s not just your sister. She’s just like any of those other girls. She has her own mind - her own wants and needs. You need to stop thinking about her in terms of your sister and think of her as the young woman she is.” Hermione paused for a long moment before continuing. “How would you feel in her position? What if she or one of your brothers opposed the thought of you getting together with me? How would you feel to have them butting into your life like that?”

Ron felt his thoughts derail as he considered her questions. If he was completely honest with himself, he knew he would hate it if any of his siblings interfered in his life in such a manner. It did not change the way he felt about Ginny and any boy she might be seeing, but he resolved to try to let it go – at least for now. As long as he did not have to actually see or hear about her with another guy, he reckoned he could handle it.

OoOoO

Harry was summoned to Dumbledore's office the following morning to discuss the punishment he had levelled to Malfoy. All it took was a calm explanation of the events on his part, followed by Snape's long-winded treatise on how spoiled and just like his father Harry was, for Dumbledore to declare that the detention would be served as Harry had assigned it. When the Headmaster thanked him for his time, Harry bid him a polite, "You're welcome," and left the office.

With that small bit of excitement out of the way, the week crawled by for Harry as he could not keep his thoughts from returning to Voldemort and his latest vision. It was frustrating to have the truth so close yet eluding his grasp. No matter how much thought he gave to the matter, he never drew closer to any conclusions. There were too many places to which Voldemort could have been referring to even attempt to account for them all, and the fact that he had no idea when the attack would even take place only compounded matters.

He spoke to Dumbledore about it during his weekly Occlumency lesson, but the old man merely advised Harry to put the matter out of his mind for now. "There is no sense worrying over that which we have no control," he had said. Harry could not fault Dumbledore's logic, but no matter his agreement, he found it difficult to let the matter rest.

At Ginny's urging he finally locked the subject away in his mind to prevent himself from dwelling on it any longer. He was getting absolutely nowhere with it, and all it served to do was distract him and put him in a foul mood, something Ginny was very effective in pointing out. She used her own brand of therapy to help him relax

after he relented to her request. By the weekend, Harry was back to his normal self and made sure to thank Ginny properly for it. Afterwards, he decided he might need to find more excuses to thank her in the future.

Saturday brought with it a full moon. Harry was feeling slightly apprehensive about seeing Remus. The last time he had seen the man it had been as 'Jim,' the incredibly original name he had given his alternate persona. He felt bad about the way he had treated Remus as Jim and wished there was some way he could make it up to him, but he knew that there was nothing he could do – at least not as Harry. Perhaps if Jim ever ran into Remus again he would be a bit friendlier.

OoOoO

Remus paced back and forth over the worn wooden floor. He would not have a lot of time before the transformation, so he would have to work quickly. He had not worked out the exact logistics of how he was going to test Harry's chest, and he regretted his lack of planning. It only served to add to his anxiety. He needed to know the truth, but at the same time, he could not help but wonder what he would do with the truth when he found it.

What if Harry really was the stranger? How should he proceed? Should he tell someone? Should he confront Harry? Back in the field of battle, he had little trouble taking direction from the young man who had not only saved their lives but who had also proven himself to be more than capable on the battlefield. It was difficult to try to reconcile the two. Could he do the same with Harry? Could he look past Harry's age and see him in the same light he had seen Jim that night?

There was only one way to find out. Remus paused his pacing as he heard footsteps approaching beneath him. Muffled voices followed, and, soon enough, the trap door opened to reveal Harry and then Ginny before his eyes.

"Evening, Remus," Harry greeted with a smile.

“Hello Harry, Ginny,” he answered, nodding to the latter.

“Hi Pro-Remus,” Ginny said. “How are you?”

“Not bad, all things considered,” he replied with a small smile. “How are things going with you two?”

“Very good,” Ginny answered as she intertwined her fingers with Harry’s.

“Did you enjoy the Valentine’s Day weekend?” he prodded. Identical grins stretched across both teenagers’ faces as they shared a short glance before turning their attention back to him. He noticed that their cheeks were both a light shade of pink, causing his own smirk to widen.

“Yes,” Harry responded a bit uncomfortably. “It was – erm – very enjoyable.” His voice regained its composure as he asked, “What about you? Do anything special with Tonks?”

“We did enjoy the evening together, yes,” he supplied, not feeling the need to go into any more detail than that. He was not quite sure he liked the smirk on Harry’s face that followed his statement, so he decided to switch topics before Harry had a chance to pry further. “So how is life at Hogwarts treating you? Quidditch must have started up again by now; are you excited about that?”

“Oh yeah,” Harry immediately responded. “Did I tell you I got a new broom?” Remus shook his head. “It’s the newest Nimbus model, the 2050. It’s only marginally faster than the Firebolt, but its acceleration and handling are noticeably better.”

“What spurred you to make that purchase?” Remus prodded. He was curious why anyone with a Firebolt would feel the need to buy a new broom.

“That would be my fault,” Ginny inserted with a sheepish look on her face.

“It was not your fault,” Harry interrupted.

“Well I was flying the broom at the time,” Ginny answered back. Remus’s eyes flicked back and forth between them as they bantered, finally resting on Ginny as she continued. “At any rate, when I was knocked off Harry’s Firebolt in our match against Slytherin, the broom was cracked.”

“Ah,” Remus responded. “I suppose that makes sense then.” A quiet settled over the trio as Remus struggled to come up with an idea of how to test Harry’s chest without being obvious about it. He could feel the transformation coming on him soon, and he feared he would miss his opportunity. His thoughts were berating him when an idea suddenly struck. It was so simple, and he was all but guaranteed his answers.

Remus soon warned his companions to transform as he could feel that there was little time left. Sure enough, not a minute later he began to feel the changes taking place - the pain as varying parts of his body were either stretched or compacted. He felt the wolf inside him rear to life and struggle for control of his mind. The Wolfsbane potion, however, helped keep the beast subdued and allowed Remus to remain in possession of his mental faculties.

Shortly after the transformation was completed, the three animals began playing and wrestling around. It was at this time that Remus set his plan in motion. He had learned back in his own time at Hogwarts that when performing the animagus transformation injuries carried over between animal and human form and vice versa. So any injuries Harry had sustained while in human form would show up on the panther in roughly the same area.

As they wrestled around, Remus managed to flip Harry onto his back and pin the panther down. Harry did not react well to being pinned on his back, but Remus could not say he had reacted in pain. He had also received a clear view of his chest and did not see anything other than smooth black fur. He let Harry up after a couple seconds, or, rather, a pouncing Ginny forced him off of Harry.

They eventually settled down, and he watched as Harry and Ginny nuzzled each other as they curled up together on the worn hearthrug. As his two companions drifted off to sleep, Remus thought over the night's events. Well short of being happy at his findings, he actually found himself slightly disappointed. Was he so desperate for the truth that he actually wanted Harry to be Jim if only so the mystery could finally be solved? He had been so certain it would be Harry. Even after learning about the possible bird animagus, he had somehow managed to convince himself it was Harry. He shook his head, wondering where his mind was. How could he let a few coincidences and a simple dream cloud his better judgment?

‘Because it was more than just a few coincidences,’ a voice in his mind reminded him. There was no use denying that it was quite a stretch to chalk everything up to coincidence. Then again, it was just as much of a stretch to believe that Harry was Jim. He had debated the topic with himself far too much over the weeks since the battle. He knew deep down that he did not want Jim to be Harry, and as much as he wished otherwise, Remus also knew that he had not proven anything that night. All he had managed to prove was that Harry's chest was unmarred. So what? It was only Jim's second-hand account of the curse that led him to believe it was the Devil's Fire. It could easily have been another, less severe curse.

He was not disappointed that Harry was not Jim. His disappointment lay in the cold fact that he would not be finding any of his answers so easily. As he surveyed the peacefully sleeping couple, he could not help but wonder what secrets they could be holding. There was one small consolation he could draw from the scene. At least, whatever he might be going through, Harry was not alone.

Chapter 20: The Truth Will Out

Monday started off just like any other day for Harry. He woke up early, met Ginny in the common room, went for a jog out on the grounds, and worked out in the room of requirement. After breakfast came a double session of Transfiguration; thereafter, Hermione departed for Arithmancy, and Harry retired to the common room for a game of exploding snap with both Ron and Neville. Lunch was one of the rare meals that Harry and Ginny ate separately – the first sign of any abnormality.

It was after lunch, however, that the day really took a turn away from the norm. Harry, Ron, and Neville were walking on the grounds on their way to Care of Magical Creatures. They were still a good ways off from Hagrid's hut when Harry noticed something peculiar. A fence had been erected behind the hut. He could not yet see what the fence was meant to enclose, but it surprised him that he had not noticed the structure that morning. Then again, he supposed it would be easy to miss if you were not looking for it. He pointed it out to Ron and Neville, and the three began speculating what the fence could be for.

“You don't think he brought back the Skrewts, do you?” Neville asked, his face going a bit pale at the prospect.

“Nah,” Harry replied. “It has to be something worse.”

“What makes you say that?” Ron questioned.

Harry shrugged as he replied, “Hagrid didn't see the need for a fence the last time we covered the Skrewts.”

“Bugger,” Neville muttered under his breath.

Meanwhile, Ron exclaimed, “Bloody hell! What could be so dangerous that even Hagrid thinks it needs to be fenced in?”

“Think he managed to get Norbert back?” Harry asked jokingly.

Ron stopped in his tracks, forcing Harry to turn around to face him. "Don't joke about things like that."

Harry rolled his eyes at Ron. "Dumbledore wouldn't let him bring a full-grown dragon to class."

"I don't know, Harry," Neville input. "Dumbledore hasn't ever stepped in before."

"True," Harry admitted. "But even he has to draw the line somewhere. Come on, or we'll be late."

And so the three continued their trek, wary of what the class would hold for them. When they finally made it to Hagrid's hut, they found most of the class crowded in front of the fence peering off into the distance to try to glean what was inside. As far as Harry could see, it looked empty.

"Come now, gather roun'," Hagrid's booming voice called, pulling Harry's attention away from the enclosed area. "Some of ya may 'ave noticed that ya can't get pas' tha fence, an' I'd a'vise ya nawt ta try it. Had Dumbledore ward it specially so none of yeh' d get 'urt."

That statement brought Harry's thought processes to a screeching halt. If Hagrid had taken precautions to ensure their safety - Harry unconsciously gulped – that could not bode well. His eyes travelled back to the fence wondering just what could be contained within. He only looked back when Hagrid continued.

"He's a lil' shy now an' aint use'ta 'is new home yet, but I'll see if I kin get 'im ta interduce 'imself," Hagrid continued. "Gather roun' tha fence while I go round'im up for ya."

With a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach, Harry glanced at his friends as they slowly approached the fence. Unsurprisingly, none of the students were all that eager to get too close. After several years of classes with Hagrid, they were all wise enough to keep their distance.

They watched as Hagrid went through the wards and into the enclosed area, heading deeper and deeper until even his massive form appeared as only a speck to their eyes . It was at this time that curiosity began to get the better of some of the students as they crept a little closer to the fence, straining to see into the distance.

After about ten minutes of waiting, Harry heard something coming from inside the tree-line, past the fence. It started distant and indistinct, but began growing louder and clearer. There was a lot of thumping, but that was as likely to be Hagrid as whatever creature he might be bringing along with him. Accompanying the thumping, though, was an occasional screeching noise. If Harry had to guess, he would say that the animal was protesting whatever Hagrid was trying to do. What he was doing became clear a moment later.

Hagrid's form emerged from the tree line with his back to the students. He was tugging on a rope with all his might. Anything that required that much force to move had to be both massive and powerful; that revelation did nothing to relieve Harry's worries.

As the form of the creature began to emerge from the forest, Harry felt his jaw dropping of its own accord. "No," he whispered. "He couldn't have."

He turned to look at Ron then Neville, the latter of which commented, "At least it's not a dragon."

"Bugger," Ron responded in a whisper.

"I'm inclined to agree with Ron on this one," Harry said as his eyes travelled back to the creature.

Intelligent yellow eyes surveyed the crowd of students as the creature continued to fight against Hagrid. Undeterred, the half giant continued to pull closer and closer to the class. "He's a might bit fussy," Hagrid grunted over his shoulder. "But 'e should ligh'en up some over time."

Harry was not inclined to agree with that statement. It did not look like it would be warming up to Hagrid or the environment in any way,

shape, or form. In fact, if looks could kill - well, a griffin does not really need a killing stare, does it? How Hagrid thought he could tame a griffin, Harry had no idea. How exactly does one communicate with an incensed magical animal?

Suddenly, something Hedwig had once told him leapt into his thoughts. All magical animals could communicate with their minds, just as owls did. Well, if that was true, perhaps he could help keep this from turning disastrous. "Hello. We mean you no harm," Harry sent through mindspeak in what he hoped would be interpreted as a friendly and soothing voice.

As soon as he sent it, the griffin stopped protesting against Hagrid. Its head turned and its eyes immediately locked onto Harry. Harry, transfixed, stared into its gaze as a scene formed in his head. He was inside the fence instead of Hagrid, and the griffin was every bit as annoyed as he was now. Instead of fighting against the rope that Harry held, however, the griffin slowly stalked towards him. Then, suddenly, it pounced.

Just as the griffin started to tear into his flesh, Harry was drawn out of the vision by Ron's voice.

"Harry?"

"Huh?" Harry said, shaking his head clear.

"I think 'e likes ya, Harry," Hagrid called jovially, looking back between him and the griffin, whose eyes were still boring into Harry's.

"Is he joking? It looks like it's sizing you up for a meal," Neville whispered at his side.

"I think you're right," Harry said as he realised what had just happened – and why. Hedwig had told him that all magical animals could communicate with their minds but that most could not use language; rather they used visions and emotions instead of words. All he had succeeded in doing was drawing the griffin's attention to himself. Based on its response, Harry thought it was pretty safe to

assume that it wanted to eviscerate him. He turned back to the creature to find that its gaze had not faltered at all.

It took a moment before he realised that Hagrid was speaking again. What he heard did nothing to improve his mood. They would be working with the griffin off and on for the rest of the year. This was not going to be an easy term.

For the rest of the day, Hagrid's latest subject material was the talk of the castle. A small selection of students were thrilled and marvelled that an actual griffin was on the grounds. The rest of the school could not quite believe that anyone could be stupid enough to allow such a dangerous creature at a school. Needless to say, the griffin was the subject of much controversy and speculation.

"I just don't see what he could be thinking," Hermione exclaimed that night in the common room. "Griffins are class four dangerous creatures. It's practically impossible to tame one, and even those that have been tamed are usually used to guard treasure because of their aggressive nature. I've never read of a griffin that could be considered docile or even non-threatening to all people."

"Trust me, this griffin looked anything but docile," Neville commented at Harry's side.

"He looked like he was ready to eat Harry alive," Ron added helpfully.

Harry shook his head at his friend across from him. There was no denying that Ron was speaking the truth, but he would rather not draw attention to the fact that the griffin was focused entirely on him.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked shrilly. "You didn't go inside the fence, did you? Please tell me you didn't."

"Of course not," Harry retorted. "Why would I go inside the fence?"

"Well if you didn't go inside the fence, why was the griffin focused on you?" she queried.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Damned if I know. Besides, Hagrid had Dumbledore ward the fence to keep us out and the griffin inside, so it's not as if I could have just gone in on a whim."

Hermione's gaze lingered on Harry for a short moment, but she did not question him further, for which he was glad. The four of them all worked on homework quietly until Harry packed up his things and bid them all good night. He always went to bed earlier than any of his peers, but even this was a bit early for Harry. His scar had been prickling annoyingly throughout the day giving him a headache. It was preventing him from concentrating on his work, so he decided to turn in early.

Stopping briefly to wish Ginny good night, Harry made his way up the stairs to his dormitory and quickly changed into his pyjamas. Once in bed, he retreated into his mind to sort his memories from that day before relaxing and allowing himself to drift off into a fitful sleep.

OoOoO

"Pray tell you have good news for me, Augustus," Voldemort hissed impatiently. Harry did his best to quiet his thoughts and lock up all his emotions – particularly his annoyance at having his sleep interrupted yet again – as he focused all of his attention on what was happening to make sure he did not miss a thing.

"I'm sorry, My Lord," the cloaked figure responded, unable to even meet his eye, "but we have not yet heard any word. We knew it would take some time to get around the wards. I'm sure it won't be much longer." Harry could feel how pleased Voldemort was at the level of fear this man showed for him.

"My patience wears thin," Voldemort responded scathingly as he fingered his wand tip in his hand, finding amusement in the way his servant's eyes followed the action.

“Yes, My Lord,” the man nervously spoke. “If there was any way I could check on him without risking his exposure... but until he is able to break through the wards, all I can do is wait.”

“Rookwood, you fool,” Voldemort hissed menacingly. “Do you think I don’t know this? I allowed you to give this job to your cousin because you claimed he was one of the most skilled curse breakers you knew. If he fails in this task,” he paused, indulging in the dread he could feel exuding from his servant, “his failure shall be your failure.”

“My Lord, he is one of the best in his field. He won’t let you down.”

“You better hope your faith in him is not misplaced,” Voldemort warned. “Your service to me has been lacking of late. Pray you do not outlive your usefulness, or I will be forced to find other uses for you.”

“M-my L-Lord,” the man stuttered.

“Be gone!” Voldemort commanded, taking satisfaction in how the man jumped at the sound of his voice and ran from the room. He continued to face forward even as he detected movement coming from the shadows at his side. It was not until the figure presented himself in the centre of the room that Voldemort spoke. “Be ready, Lucius. We must act quickly. The Aurors are not so incompetent as to not notice after the wards have fallen. I expect you and your men to be ready at a moment’s notice.”

“My Lord,” Malfoy intoned with a slight bow of his head. “I will await your orders.”

“Good,” Voldemort said. He paused a moment before adding, “Fail me this time, Lucius, and the consequences will be severe.” His voice was menacing in its eerie calm.

“We will not fail you, My Lord.”

Voldemort did not answer but turned his head away from his servant. He tired of talking with his inferiors. Harry felt himself withdrawing into his mind as he pondered what he had just witnessed. As he did so,

he felt his consciousness returning to his own body as he woke up. He sat up in his bed for several minutes, lost in thought. Whatever Voldemort was planning, it had to be big.

Harry rose out of bed and quietly got dressed. It was early still, but he did not want to wait. Glancing at his watch, he thought he would have time to get back before Ginny woke up, so he exited the common room and began his trek down to the Headmaster's office, his scar stinging every step of the way. Harry gave the stone gargoyle the password as he approached, and it sprang aside to grant him entrance.

Harry let the staircase carry him up and knocked on the door to Dumbledore's office. "Come in," the old man's voice called from inside. Harry entered the room to find the Headmaster sitting behind his desk as if it was the most natural place to be at such an ungodly hour of the morning. "Good morning, Mr. Potter," he greeted. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

As tired as Harry was, he opted to skip the usual pleasantries and cut straight to the point. "I had another vision."

"Please, have a seat," Dumbledore said as he motioned his hand toward the seat in front of his desk. When Harry had seated himself, he continued, "Now, what is it that you saw?"

Harry explained, in as much detail as he could recall, all that he had learned in his latest vision. When he finished his explanation, Harry leaned back in his chair as he watched the Headmaster. There was a prolonged silence hanging in the air before the old man let out a weary sigh, and Harry caught the first signs of fatigue in his face.

Harry decided to speak, "It doesn't really tell us much, except that it could happen at any moment – whatever it might be. Lately my scar has been bothering me more than usual as well, and I think it's because Voldemort is getting anxious."

Dumbledore nodded. "It does eliminate a few things if he is most worried about the Aurors noticing the tampering in the wards, but there are many places the Aurors could be responsible for. I will talk

to Kingsley and Tonks and set them on alert for anything strange or out of the ordinary. In the meantime, we will simply need to wait for either more information or for the attack to begin.”

“Sir, what about Rookwood’s cousin?” Harry asked. “Do you know who they were referring to?”

Dumbledore sighed wearily before answering. “That is an avenue to pursue, but I fear it will prove to be more difficult than you imagine. Without knowing whether it is a first cousin or some distant relative, it could take weeks to look into every possibility. Even if we do learn his identity, there is still the matter of locating him. Since we do not know their target, we have no idea where to begin searching, and wherever he is, he is likely doing his best to remain undetected as he tries to dismantle the wards.”

Harry nodded tiredly and unsuccessfully tried to stifle a yawn. “Well, it’s almost time for my morning jog,” Harry stated as he rose from his chair. “I’ll let you know if I remember anything else or if I have another vision.”

“Thank you, Harry,” the Headmaster stated, and Harry could feel the sincerity in his words. Somehow he thought Dumbledore knew how much it bothered Harry that he was still trying to shield him from the war and knew that a part of Harry wanted to return the favour in kind.

Harry bid his goodbye, stopping briefly at Fawkes’ perch to greet the phoenix, and exited the office. He stumbled down the steps and out into the corridors where he slowly made his way back up to the common room. Ginny was just coming down the stairs as he was walking in and looked at him in confusion as he walked towards the two staircases.

“I had another vision,” Harry explained when he had drawn close to her.

Understanding passed over her features, and, without uttering a word, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly in her embrace. He returned the hug and just stood there in her

arms for a long minute, inhaling the scent of her hair – free of any shampoos or other perfumery – and let out a contented sigh. For the first time that morning, he felt his body relaxing. He had not realised how tense he had been until that very moment.

As she released her grip, Ginny rose onto her toes to kiss him on the cheek, and Harry felt a tug at the corner of his lips at the action. “Thanks Ginny,” he whispered. “I really needed that.”

He was rewarded with a wide, dazzling smile, and he leaned down to give her a short kiss. “Let me go change, and I’ll be right back down.”

His morning routine went a long way in waking Harry up and preparing him for the day ahead. He survived his morning classes, but by lunch time, he felt fatigue creeping up on him. After lunch, instead of going to the room of requirement for his usual training session, Harry took a detour to his office. He dug out his potion supplies and began preparing ingredients for an Invigoration Draught. He had a feeling he would need it to make it through the rest of his day.

He missed out on his entire training session and instead settled on his sofa to read while the potion simmered. When after only about ten minutes Harry was snapped awake as his head bobbed down, he knew he had made the right call about the draught. He got up and paced around for a bit in an attempt to wake himself up before settling down in his desk chair. It would force him to sit up and would hopefully be enough to keep him from drifting off again.

He found it much easier to concentrate on what he was reading from an upright position, and it was not long before the potion was ready. He had made a few doses, so while he prepared one dose to take right away, he bottled up the rest of the potion and stored it in his trunk. He downed the potion in one gulp and spent a little more time reading before the time came to leave for Charms.

Harry’s scar continued to bother him throughout the week. He could sense a building anticipation in Voldemort’s emotions. What that meant for Harry was constant worry accompanied by frequent headaches. It also meant that what little sleep he got was fitful at best.

He was embarrassed to admit to Ginny on Saturday that he had already finished his supply of Invigoration Draught. When she warned him of the danger of getting addicted to it, he knew he had better not brew another batch right away. She was right. The temptation was just too strong when the potion was sitting right there. He would only make more when he absolutely needed it.

In lieu of taking another potion that day, Ginny insisted that he take a nap in the afternoon. She also insisted that she be there to ensure that he rested well. Part of him wanted to object, but he knew that he could use the extra rest, and he was grateful to her for looking out for him. Harry was not about to suggest they use the bed in his trunk, so instead he retired on the sofa in his office. Ginny sat down on one end, and he lay across the rest of the sofa with his head lying in Ginny's lap.

He lay on his back looking up into her smiling face as she began running her fingers gently through his hair. He smiled back at her as he turned onto his side and peacefully closed his eyes.

OoOoO

While Harry was napping on Ginny's lap in the privacy of his office, Hermione was reading quietly in the common room when Ron's voice drew her attention away from her book. "Have you ever noticed how Harry and Ginny always seem to be missing at the same time?" He spoke quietly at her side, settling on the arm of her chair.

Hermione paused to mark her place in her book before closing it deliberately and looking up at Ron. "You are not still on about that, are you?" she asked him with hints of incredulity and frustration in her voice.

Ron ignored her question as he stared into the common room fire. "It's just..." He paused and shook his head before turning to face her. "Don't you ever wonder why they're always missing together? Don't you wonder what they could be doing? Harry's got his own office. They could be doing anything in there!"

Hermione furrowed her brow as she thought about that. It was a bit irresponsible to give Harry an office without monitoring what he was doing in there, but then again, Professor Dumbledore was probably keeping an eye on things. He always seemed to know what was going on – especially with Harry. She trusted the professor to keep Harry from using his office the way many students used the school broom cupboards. Besides, she knew Harry would never try to take advantage of Ginny in that way.

It was likely Ron was worked up over this because he was imagining what he would use an office for if he had one. That thought gave her a private thrill, but it also brewed indignation in Hermione. She did not want to be thought of as just a means towards some sort of physical gratification. She wanted to be appreciated for her mind. Ron admiring her body would just be an added bonus.

“What makes you think they are doing anything they shouldn’t be?” Hermione asked.

“What makes you think they’re not?” Ron fired back.

“Six years of friendship,” Hermione responded tersely but not harshly. “You’re being unreasonable, Ron. This is Harry we’re talking about. Ginny is going to have boyfriends whether you like it or not. You should be happy that it’s Harry she’s chosen. At least now you don’t have to worry about him pushing her too fast. If anything, she’ll have to push him.”

“I do not want to hear that!” Ron exclaimed, throwing his hands over his ears dramatically. After a moment he pulled his hands down. “Besides, if there’s nothing for me to worry about, then why haven’t they told us anything? If they’re not doing anything we wouldn’t frown upon, why keep it a secret?”

Hermione had to think about that for a moment. “I don’t know, Ron. It could be a variety of reasons. They may not even be together. We’re assuming a lot here. But let’s say they are. They may just want to avoid being in the spotlight. After all Harry has been through, I can’t exactly blame him for wanting some privacy. Or maybe they were

afraid you'd react badly. Let's face it; you weren't exactly friendly with Michael Corner last year. And when you thought Dean and Ginny were together, you turned on him as well. Maybe Harry is worried that this will set you off."

It did not explain why she too was left out of the loop, but given recent developments in her relationship with Ron, she could understand why they might lump her in with him. At any rate, her words seemed to have the desired effect as Ron slumped back a bit in his seat and appeared to be considering what she had said.

After a long minute, Ron turned his head to her and asked, "Do you really think he might be worried about telling me?"

"Yes," Hermione responded honestly. "I do."

"So what should I do? Just sit around and wait until they decide to tell me?" Ron asked, running his hands through his hair.

"Why don't you talk to them? Talk to Harry. Ask him about his relationship with Ginny, and let him know that it's okay with you if he wants to be with her. And before you even think about it, don't even bother warning him not to hurt Ginny," Hermione stated. "It's insulting to even insinuate he would do such a thing."

She spied Ron frowning at her warning, which made her all the more glad she had brought it up. It would be just like him to play the protective brother card. "You don't have to do anything right now," Hermione advised. "Think about it and come to terms with everything it means, then talk to Harry about it. I'm sure if you approach him calmly and keep your cool that he'll be upfront with you."

"Maybe you're right," Ron muttered, nodding absently to himself.

Hermione reached her hand out to squeeze Ron's hand and gave him a warm smile when he turned towards her. He smiled back, and, satisfied, Hermione opened up her book and picked up where she had left off.

OoOoO

Harry had not slept so soundly in weeks, yet his nap was over all too soon. He felt refreshed afterwards but knew the feeling would only be temporary. It gave him enough energy to carry him through the evening and his two HA classes the following day. His BHA classes were progressing pretty smoothly. Having his lesson plans from the previous term went a long way in facilitating the process.

His elite group of BHA members, as he had begun to think of them, were quickly improving in their duelling skills. They were becoming much more adept in incorporating movement into their mock battles. He often put a restriction on their uses of shields just to further emphasize that facet of combat.

His IHA classes were a bit more difficult to manage. It was hard to keep a balance of duelling practice and teaching new spells. For one, it was impossible to coordinate thirty some people duelling all at once. So when they turned the focus to duelling, a large portion of the class was only watching while the rest was getting the much needed practice. He needed to find some way to organize things a little better, but no solutions were readily forthcoming.

Harry's energy began to dissipate shortly after supper, and it was not long before he was feeling completely knackered. He stuck around the common room for a nominal period before making his excuses and heading up into his dormitory.

Harry was just about to change into his pyjamas when Ron walked into the room. It was odd to see any of his dorm mates up there even at Harry's normal bedtime. Because of both his Occlumency exercises and his early mornings, Harry had a tendency to turn in earlier than any of the other boys in his year. Given the fact that he was early by even his own standards, he assumed there was something specific Ron was there for.

"Hey, Ron. What's up?" Harry greeted.

“I was – er – wondering if we could talk for a minute,” Ron requested, noticeably uncomfortable.

Harry furrowed his brow as he wondered what had Ron so nervous. “Sure,” Harry replied, turning away from his trunk and taking a seat on his bed. “What did you want to talk about?”

Ron sat on his own bed across from Harry and wrung his hands for a moment before responding. “I know you and Ginny have been pretty friendly since the summer, but I couldn’t quite help but notice that you two seem to spend a lot of time together. And the two of you are often missing at the same times. I was just wondering what was going on with you two.”

That brought Harry up short. He knew that the truth about his relationship with Ginny would come out in the open at some point, yet he found himself woefully unprepared for Ron’s question. When he had envisioned this happening, however, he always saw himself seeking out Ron to tell him, not the other way around. For the first time, Harry began to regret his decision to withhold that bit of information from his friends. He knew, however, that there was only one answer he could give. “Ginny and I are together.” He braced himself, not knowing how Ron would react to that simple statement.

“How long?” Ron asked, not quite meeting Harry’s eye.

“A few weeks.”

Ron nodded his head as if he had expected that answer. After a moment, he looked up and asked, “How come you didn’t tell me?”

Harry blew out a breath. Something about Ron’s tone made him feel guilty, yet he could not help but feel emboldened that Ron did not seem to be taking the news badly. He knew he would have to pick his words carefully now, though, lest he make matters worse. “I don’t know exactly. Part of it was that I was worried how you’d react. I don’t really know how to explain the rest. I just – I wanted it to be something that she and I shared. I didn’t want it to be this big thing

that everybody was talking about. I just wanted to be able to enjoy being with her, you know?"

"Not really," Ron replied with a ghost of a smirk on his lips. "I know I haven't exactly been fair to Ginny's previous boyfriends. Well, just the one if you don't count Dean. It's just – it's hard for me. Ginny's always been my little sister, you know? I know she's not so little any more, but it's difficult to accept it and let go. It's not that I don't trust you. You're my best mate. I just – I may need some time to get used to it is all."

A smile slowly spread across Harry's face. That was as good as a blessing as far as he was concerned. "We'll try to keep from being too – erm – you know," Harry paused as he tried to think of a good word for it.

"Yeah," Ron interrupted, a little more loudly than was necessary. "That would be great."

Harry smiled. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner."

"It's okay," Ron replied. "I wish you had, but even I can't guarantee how I would have reacted had you caught me out of the blue with it."

The two of them shared a short chuckle at that. "Fancy a game of chess?" Ron asked a moment later.

Harry hesitated in his response. Truth be told he wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and try to get as much sleep as possible. It had been quite some time, however, since he had played the game with Ron, and he knew it would mean a lot to his friend even just to go one match.

"Sure, mate," Harry agreed.

Though Harry tried his best, Ron systematically destroyed his pieces until he was able to trap Harry's king in checkmate. When Ron asked for another game, Harry declined, saying he had a bit of a headache and was planning to turn in early. Ron nodded his head and went

back downstairs to try to entice another victim to play him in chess. Harry thought idly about trying to find Ginny to tell her about his conversation with Ron, but he decided it would hold until the morning.

After quickly running through his Occlumency exercises and sorting his memories for the day, Harry lay down in bed and closed his eyes. Just a short couple hours later, Harry woke up with a start. He bit his lip to stifle a groan as his hand flew up to his scar. He silently leapt out of bed and undressed out of his pyjamas and into a pair of jeans and black t-shirt. He threw one of his school robes over his head and rushed out the door and down the stairs. He crossed the threshold of the common room in a few seconds and burst through the portrait hole, leaving a frazzled and sputtering fat lady in his wake.

He ran down the shadowy corridors and practically flew down the stairways on his way to the Headmaster's office. There was so little time. Panting, he uttered the password to the gargoyle, sprinted up the moving staircase, and burst into the office without bothering to knock.

It took his eyes only half a second to find the Headmaster, rising from the fire, alarm written across his face for a brief moment until he locked eyes with Harry. "It's St. Mungo's. They're on their way now," Harry blurted out around his ragged breathing.

"Yes, I know," Dumbledore calmly replied. "I just sent word to the Order. They will be there as soon as they can to handle the threat."

Harry stared at the man blankly for a moment before the words processed in his brain. "You knew it was St. Mungo's?" he asked in confusion and betrayal.

"I heard word from Kingsley not ten minutes ago that something was happening to the wards there. Since then, I've been contacting everyone I could to get them prepared," Dumbledore answered.

Harry nodded as his senses were catching back up with him. He did not have time to stand around chatting. "Well, I guess I'll leave you to deal with things then," Harry said.

“Thank you, Harry,” the Headmaster replied.

Harry nodded as he turned and exited. He closed the door behind him before springing down the stairs. He rushed into the first classroom he came across and headed for the windows. Harry reached out with his mind as he did so, calling Hedwig to him. Harry scanned the room until he found a spare bit of parchment and a quill and ink pot. He scribbled a hasty note to Ginny to let her know what happened and where he was. As he finished writing, Hedwig swooped into the room. He quickly tied the note to her leg and instructed her to take the letter to Ginny. With a hoot, Hedwig flew back out the window.

Harry transformed a second later and flew out the window behind his owl. He beat his wings hard to gain altitude and velocity. He landed a little ways outside the gates of Hogwarts and hastily changed his contacts to the brown ones, shortened his hair, and put a glamour over his scar. With that done, he threw off his robe and stuffed it into his trunk, then shrunk the trunk and slipped it into his pocket. He was gone a second later, with only a whisper left in the air from his Disapparation.

He appeared in Muggle London outside a worn down department store that bore a sign in the window letting shoppers know it was closed for refurbishment. Harry paid the sign no mind as he walked up to the window with the mannequin. He put his hand to the glass and found that it was still solid. He looked the dummy in the eye and hurriedly said, “I’m here to get rid of the Death Eaters.”

For a split second nothing happened. Harry was ready to start throwing blasting hexes until he forced his way into the hospital, but then the dummy beckoned him forward, permitting him to step through to the lobby of St. Mungo’s.

He looked around to try to find out where he needed to be, and he was struck by how tranquil everything seemed. ‘They must not have struck yet,’ Harry thought to himself as a feeling of relief washed over him. He blew out a long, steady breath as he considered what he should do.

Just then a loud bang reverberated throughout the already noisy room. Startled, everyone stopped to stare up at the ceiling as if expecting the source of the sound to materialise before their eyes. Harry knew that his time had just run out. While everyone else was still stationary, Harry rushed to the stairs and sped up them two – sometimes three – at a time. As he reached the first floor, he looked down the hall but did not see anything that would indicate the Death Eaters were there, so he kept climbing. When he reached the second floor, he saw them and had to duck out of the way of a curse heading in his direction.

Peeking back around the corner, Harry took a second to appraise his adversaries. There were about a dozen just in that corridor. Not seeing any better way to enter the fray, Harry stepped out from his hiding spot firing curses as quickly as he could manage them. Unfortunately, the Death Eaters were prepared for his assault. They had plenty of time to construct shields to block his volley of spells, and because there were so many of them, the others had time to start firing curses back, forcing Harry back behind the corner.

Harry shielded his head with his hands as the curses connected with the stairwell behind him, sending chunks of stone flying through the air. If the stairs took much more abuse, they would be in danger of crumbling, closing off his only escape route.

He had to get closer if he hoped to have any chance in this fight; there were just too many of them, and they were too far away for him to stand any chance of winning. The narrow corridor, however, made getting any nearer a difficult prospect. He snuck another quick glance around the corner and had to pull back as several Death Eaters unleashed a slew of curses that caused further destruction behind Harry.

Taking a deep breath, Harry readied himself. There was an open door a few metres down the hallway, and he was going to make a break for it. Forgoing secrecy, he leapt out into the corridor firing curses with both hands as he quickly ran and dove through the open doorway. He glanced around quickly and saw several patients looking

at him in alarm. "Take cover, if you can," he told them. "There are Death Eaters here."

Harry did not wait to see if his words were heeded. He spied through the crack created by the hinges of the door and racked his brain for some sort of strategy. He needed some way to distract or immobilise the group of Death Eaters to give himself time to actually launch an attack. His mind quickly drifted back to his HA lessons. There was something hanging just on the edge of his consciousness if only he could remember it.

Then it hit him. He stepped out of the doorway firing curses with his wand hand while he shot a jet of oil at the crowd of Death Eaters with his left hand. It took them a moment to realise what was happening before one of them was able to block the stream of liquid. Harry had to roll back into the room at his side to avoid another slew of curses. He was able to just see a couple Death Eaters slip on the slick oil, pulling a couple of their comrades down with them.

A moment later, Harry rushed back out into the hallway firing curses. Unfortunately, several of the Death Eaters were ready for that, and one of them was clever enough to cast Colloportus on the door. The spell connected just a second after he had jumped out into the hallway.

As the sound of the slamming door reverberated in his ears, Harry knew he was in trouble. He had no time to reflect on his fate, however, for there was a stream of curses headed his way. One of the cloaked figures Vanished the oil on the ground as the others held their attentions on Harry. Harry was able to block and avoid several spells, but he was soon barraged by hexes as the few Death Eaters who had fallen victim to his oil spell were regaining their bearings.

Mixed in among the torrent of spells was a sickly green colour that Harry knew all too well. As he ducked out of the way of a Killing Curse, Harry had no choice but to enter into the path of another spell. His shield could not withstand the force of the spell, but it deflected the curse enough that it impacted his shoulder instead of his chest.

Harry released a grunt of pain as he was knocked back several steps. He felt a terrible wrenching on his arm at the shoulder and found that he could not move his left arm. The force of the spell had broken Harry's concentration, and he was quickly impacted by two more spells. The first left a gash along his torso. The second spell, however, left Harry on the ground writhing in agony.

The volley of curses ceased, but Harry was unable to notice. He was too consumed by the interminable pain assailing every inch of his body. It was impossible to pin down the pain or even understand it. It was stabbing, biting, piercing, stinging, pinching, burning, tearing, bludgeoning – every type of pain you could ever experience.

Then, suddenly, it was gone. In its place set in a deep, dull ache pounding throughout his entire body. His respite was brief, however, as the pain returned in full force, drawing a ravaged cry from his throat. What seemed an eternity passed, but the pain again disappeared, only to start up again a few moments later. When the pain again stopped, Harry dimly thought he could hear voices and laughter, but he was unable to concentrate on the sounds.

Through the ache in his body and mind, Harry began to wonder if this was the end for him. A sudden fear overtook him. There was still so much he had to accomplish. He had only really just begun to train, to fight, and to make a difference. It was his destiny – his duty – to defeat Voldemort. What would become of the world with him no longer there to put a stop to him?

Ginny.

He never got the opportunity to say goodbye, and he would never get to see her again. And what was worse, what would her life be like, constantly fighting and hiding? That was a sobering thought, and he latched onto it as he struggled back to awareness. He had to fight, to survive this, for Ginny. Harry blearily looked around, taking in his surroundings for the first time to find a small crowd of Death Eaters standing around him talking and laughing. He focused on their voices to find that they were arguing over who was to curse Harry next – and who would get the pleasure of killing him.

As the decision was made, one of the masked figures trained his wand on Harry while the others watched and waited eagerly. Everything appeared to Harry as if it was happening at half-speed. As the man began moving his wand, Harry lifted his right hand up with some effort, extending it toward his impending attacker. The Death Eaters all laughed and jeered at what they took as a plea for mercy. The laughter ceased, however, when a deep red jet of light flew from Harry's palm and threw the Death Eater into the wall. The man slumped down to the ground unconscious.

The spell left Harry feeling drained of all energy, and he idly wondered if he had the strength to make it through the night – but he had to try. The other Death Eaters were momentarily stunned, giving Harry just enough time to strike again before his target was able to shield himself.

His third target was able to construct a shield just in time to catch Harry's curse. The force of the spell was enough to send the man stumbling back into the wall, but he was still conscious, albeit dazed. By the time Harry turned to the next Death Eater, the man's wand was already in motion.

“Avada keda...”

A bright light illuminated the man from behind as his voice broke off, and he fell sideways to the ground. The two Death Eaters still crowded around Harry turned their attentions down the hallway, giving Harry the opportunity to strike. He wearily cast a Stunner at one man and kicked out his leg at the knee of the other. The first was knocked out instantly, while Harry's kick sent the other stumbling into another spell. Harry turned back to where he had last left the dazed Death Eater to find that he had already been incapacitated.

He lifted his head just enough to see his saviour, then let his head fall heavily back to the ground. He might just make it yet.

OoOoO

Remus warily walked down the body-laden hallway, peeking into doors and windows for any possible threats as he made his way to Jim. He turned back to his comrades and said, "It looks clear."

He took two more steps forward then knelt down next to the young man. "Are you all right?" he asked with some concern. As he said it, he realised what a stupid question it was. He looked absolutely horrible.

"Splendid," the boy replied with a deep grimace. "Good to see you again."

Remus could not help the tug at the corner of his lips. If he still had a sense of humour, that could only be a good sign. "Likewise. I only wish we could meet under better circumstances." He looked around briefly and saw that Tonks and her partner, Ben, were searching all the rooms. Looking back down, he asked, "Where are you hurt?"

"Everywhere," Jim replied tightly. "Cruciatus will do that to you." Remus nodded solemnly as Jim added, "But I can't move my left arm."

"You've got a gash across your chest as well," Remus commented offhandedly.

"Huh?" Jim replied, trying to lift his head to look at his chest. Remus briefly wondered how he could have failed to notice the wound, but the Cruciatus Curse was enough to make you forget anything.

"That I can heal easily," Remus said. He tore open Jim's shirt a bit as if to get better access to the wound and confirmed his suspicion: he bore no scar. Not wasting any more time, Remus held his wand over the wound. It was just a short minute before Jim's chest was looking as good as new. "Now," he said once he had finished, "let's take a look at that arm." He looked more closely and quickly realised what was wrong. "It looks like your arm was pulled out of its socket. I could probably fix it, but Tonks has more healer training than I do. Hold on one second."

Remus stood up and began looking for Tonks, allowing his mind a moment to ponder his latest discovery. Unfortunately for his troubled mind, it took just a minute to find her. "Tonks, I need your help," he called, walking into the room. "His arm's been torn from its socket, and I don't want to risk making it worse."

"We are in a hospital, you know, Remus," Tonks replied. "Shouldn't we just take him to a healer?"

"I thought they were trying to evacuate everyone?" Remus retorted. "Besides, if we get him patched up ourselves, it could prove to be beneficial."

"Beneficial?" she asked skeptically.

Remus had only spoken of Jim with Tonks very shortly. She was not very impressed by the boy's attitude at their last meeting, and Remus felt he needed to learn more before he shared his suspicions of his real identity. "You know how badly Dumbledore wants to know more about him," he replied. "If we can earn his trust, we might be able to learn more about him, possibly even earn an ally."

"All right, all right," Tonks said, her shoulders drooping ever so slightly. "You win. Let's go heal him up."

Remus smiled and followed Tonks out of the room, kneeling on Jim's right side as he explained, "It's his left arm."

Tonks nodded and crouched down on his other side. "Do you know what you were hit with?" she asked briskly.

Jim's head shook fractionally. "No. There were too many of them, and it all happened so fast. I managed to get a shield up, but it wasn't enough to stop it."

"Okay, let's see what we're working with then," Tonks said as she carefully took his arm into her hands.

Remus was glad to see that she was being as gentle as she could be. He watched as Jim winced at the contact, but the boy made no noise of pain or protest. Still holding onto his arm with one hand, Tonks waved her arm over his shoulder and arm. A soft blue light covered the tip of her wand as she ran her diagnostic spells. A minute later, Tonks looked up at Remus before focusing on Jim's face. "Aside from your dislocated shoulder, you've got a couple fractures as well. I should be able to heal it all unless you'd rather wait for a healer."

"No," Jim replied. "Go ahead, I trust you."

Remus smiled at Tonks briefly, and she rolled her eyes at him. She then muttered a few spells over Jim's shoulder, and in a couple of minutes announced, "There, that should do it. You'll want to try to keep from doing anything too strenuous with it for a bit, but other than that, you're as good as new."

"Thanks," Jim replied. As he began to wearily sit up, Remus reached an arm around his back to help him. "Thank you," he said, looking straight into Remus's eyes. There was something in his eyes, something familiar to Remus. He almost expected to see Harry's green eyes staring back at him; instead, he found Jim's brown eyes.

"Is this all of them?" Jim asked, looking around.

"I don't know," Remus replied. "When we saw you here, we separated from the rest of our group. They could still be fighting elsewhere."

"Well, then what are we still doing here?" Putting his right hand on the ground, Jim began to hoist himself up. Remus moved forward to give him a hand, but the boy managed it on his own.

He looked a bit unsteady on his feet at first, but he was quickly regaining his balance.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Remus inquired in concern. "You said you were put under the Cruciatus Curse."

“It wasn’t the first time,” Jim succinctly retorted.

Remus felt himself at a loss. “Well, at least stay with us. We’ll all be safer if we stick together.”

Jim seemed to consider it for a moment before nodding his head. “All right. How well have you searched this floor?”

“Just this corridor,” Ben’s voice called from several metres off, walking back to the group. “Several of the rooms are destroyed, and the only Death Eaters are the ones on the ground.”

“Shall we head further down to clear the floor?” Remus asked.

“We should do something with these Death Eaters first,” Jim interrupted, sweeping his hand over the array of scattered bodies. “Do any of you know how to put up anti-portkey wards?”

Remus nodded his head. “Yes, but wouldn’t it just be easier to take their portkeys?”

Jim shook his head. “I tried summoning them the last time we met, remember? They’ve found some way around that.”

“We should put them all together in one of the rooms,” Ben input. “That one’s empty,” he said, pointing to an open door further down the hall.

“Bind them and break their wands, too,” Jim said. “It never hurts to be thorough.”

Remus nodded his head as they all set to work. It took only a couple minutes to round everyone up. They piled them all into a corner of the room. Tonks asked him if he wanted help, but he shook his head. The area was small enough that it should not be too draining to manage. It took several more minutes to construct the wards. They were not his best work and would not last more than a day, two at most, but they should suffice.

After he had finished, they gathered outside in the corridor. “Well, shall we search the rest of the floor?” Remus asked.

Tonks nodded at him. “Ben and I will take point; you two cover us,” she directed before nodding at her partner and moving forward.

Remus glanced at Jim. He seemed unhappy to be given orders but thankfully did not object. He turned to look at Remus and nodded as he began walking after the two Aurors.

Remus walked hurriedly until he fell in step beside Jim. “How did you know to be here?” he whispered curiously.

Jim looked at him levelly. “I have my sources.”

Remus wondered what possible source a boy his age could have. For an average person, the only possibility Remus could fathom was either an Order member or a Death Eater – and it would most likely have to be a member of the inner circle at that. If it was Harry, though – what had Dumbledore told them last week? Harry thought he was able to witness what Voldemort was doing without Voldemort being aware of his presence. That would be the ultimate source.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes as Tonks and Ben searched each room they passed for any signs of Death Eaters. Then, Jim broke Remus from his thoughts. “I’m sorry for being short with you – last time, that is.”

Remus raised an eyebrow at the apology even as he replied, “Don’t worry about it.” It surprised him to hear Jim apologizing for his behaviour. He had been short with them, yes, but he had also just saved their lives and nearly killed himself doing it. He just could not imagine a complete stranger dwelling on something like that, especially given the situation they had been in. “We were all stressed. It happens.”

Jim nodded and turned forward. Remus followed suit, walking on, lost in his thoughts. He racked his brain trying to think of some way to learn more about Jim, to either confirm or disprove his suspicions – to

try to get him to slip up and reveal something about his identity. Then, he thought of something. "Do you always work alone?"

Jim stopped walking as the two Aurors turned into a room. "Yeah, why?"

"Just curious, is all," Remus answered nonchalantly. That eliminated the twin theory, unless he was lying, but Remus did not think so. The way Jim responded, he sounded surprised to be asked the question. He was either being honest, or he was an incredible actor. "I should tell you, we've wondered a lot about you for several months now. We've been trying to figure out just who you are and what it is you're fighting for. I hope you don't take offence at that," Remus added as he saw the look on Jim's face. "But we're in the middle of a war, and we needed to be sure of where you stood."

There was silence for a long moment before they began walking again. "And what did you find out?" Jim asked in what Remus interpreted as a forced calm.

"Next to nothing," Remus replied with a wry grin. "Except..." he trailed off.

"Except what?" Jim asked apprehensively.

"Well, we believe you are a panther Animagus," Remus told him boldly. He noticed Jim's eyes widen momentarily before he schooled his features.

"Oh? What makes you think that?" Jim's voice was unnaturally devoid of any emotion.

"Ginny Weasley," Remus replied. "You saved her life over the summer in Diagon Alley." He smiled at Jim as he added, "You know, it's funny, but you're the second person I've met to have that form."

"Really?" Jim asked.

They both stopped as the two Aurors entered another room. Remus turned to face Jim fully and took the opportunity to study his features closely. The eyes and hair were both different, and the lack of a scar helped obscure his identity, but there was no doubt left in his mind. "Awful coincidence, don't you think, Harry?"

Chapter 21: A Test of Loyalty

Harry's eyes widened in shock. "Remus," he began, his voice a whisper, when a loud bang reverberated through the hospital. Tonks and Ben immediately rushed back into the hallway.

"It sounded like it came from upstairs," Ben briskly stated.

Harry nodded his agreement. "Come on. Let's go." He glanced briefly at Remus, who gave him a fractional nod as if to say, 'I'll keep quiet for now, but we will be discussing this later.'

Harry once again followed behind the two Aurors as they led the way to the staircase. He jogged alongside Remus but pushed the matter of his revealed identity out of his mind. There would be time to worry about it later. For now, they had to concentrate on the matter at hand. Harry trailed behind Tonks as they ascended the stairs. It was not the main staircase that Harry had taken earlier but another one separated from the hallway by a door.

As they reached the next landing, Ben stuck his head out the door and looked both ways. As he retreated back into the stairwell he said, "Nothing. Let's try the next floor."

Harry had positioned himself such that he ended up first in line up the stairs this time. He sprinted up two steps at a time and paused as he reached the door. With a glance back to make sure everyone was ready, he wrenched it open and stuck his head out. He saw nothing but heard a commotion coming from his left. He turned back to the others and whispered, "Sounds like there's something coming from around the bend." His eyes glanced momentarily to each of their faces before he turned back, opened the door fully, and walked out. As he approached the bend in the hall, he stepped lightly on his toes to avoid making a sound.

Peering around the corner, Harry saw a couple scattered bodies in the corridor. There were a few cloaked figures moving about carefully, going into this room or that. He could see the illumination of different spells in some of the rooms and then saw a head peek out from the far end of the hall. It was not masked, but Harry could not make out

any of its features from that distance. He ducked back and quickly explained what he had seen to the others.

Just as he finished his description, a voice called out, "Drop your wands, or else the boy dies."

Harry would recognise that drawl anywhere. "Malfoy," he muttered. Ben moved to peek around the corner to see what was going on, but Harry reached out to stop him. "No, wait," he whispered. "I've got an Invisibility Cloak."

The man hesitated a moment before nodding. Harry took several steps back and pulled out his trunk. Taking out the cloak, he shrunk and stuffed the trunk back into his pocket and turned to the others. He held up a finger, donned the cloak, and then stepped back around the corner. He quickly surveyed the scene before stepping back around the corner and lowering his hood. "There are seven of them in the hall, but it looks like there is activity in some of the rooms. They've got a man with red hair bound on the ground in the hall with their wands all levelled on him."

Harry's stomach was clenched in both fear and anger. What he neglected to tell them was that he was all but positive it was a Weasley, but he was too far away to distinguish which one. He forced down the feeling knowing it would not help in the current situation.

"Every second you hesitate brings the boy closer to his death," Malfoy's voice again rang out.

"They don't know we're here," Harry quickly explained. "They're all facing the other way. I'll sneak up behind them and try to free the man before they kill him."

"Not alone, you won't," Remus said tersely, looking Harry straight in the eyes.

"The cloak will only fit one," Harry stated with a warning glare at Remus. "Wait for my signal, then come ready to fight."

Harry reached to pull his hood back on, but Remus interrupted him. "Wait, take these." He held out a hand with four snitch-sized balls with a slight depression in them. Harry almost smirked. The twins had managed to convince Dumbledore after all. "Press this button and you'll have three seconds before it explodes with a bunch of minor hexes. It won't do any lasting damage but should confuse them at the very least."

Harry nodded, took the four magic grenades, and flipped his hood back on. Careful to stay light on his toes, he hurried down the corridor closer to the Death Eaters.

"Very well," Malfoy stated, stepping forward. "You've sealed the boy's fate."

"Wait," a voice called out. Harry recognised it all too well. Professor McGonagall's face appeared from around the corner, holding out her wand in a non-threatening position. She placed it on the ground and remained still with most of her body still hidden.

"The other two as well," Malfoy demanded.

Harry wanted to scream at her that Malfoy would never keep his word, but he held his tongue, knowing he needed to keep concealed as his intervention would likely be the only thing able to save them.

McGonagall disappeared for a moment, then came back holding two more wands which she placed on the ground next to hers.

"Fools," Malfoy spat, summoning the group of wands. "Come on out quickly or his life ends."

Three figures moved out of their hiding: McGonagall, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and a man Harry did not know.

Malfoy laughed at them. "Now you can watch as he dies."

With two balls in each hand, Harry pressed all four buttons at once and bent down to roll them towards the crowd. Counting in his head,

Harry kept a close eye on Malfoy as he stepped towards the prone figure. It was Bill Weasley. One. Malfoy raised his wand and began moving it in a pattern Harry was growing all too familiar with. Two. Harry raised both hands and extended them towards the Death Eaters, keeping one trained on Malfoy as he fired off two bludgeoning hexes. Malfoy's voice once again poisoned the air with his malevolent drawl. "Avada..." Minerva, Kingsley, and their companion suddenly sprang into action, pulling out wands and firing curses. Three. "...Kedavra."

The four grenades exploded in a shower of multi-colored hexes just as Harry's spell connected with Malfoy. The lights blinded Harry from seeing whether any spells had reached in time to spare Bill's life. He had no time to dwell on it at the moment as he fired off two Everberos into the confused crowd of Death Eaters. Confused by the spells coming at them from all directions, all seven Death Eaters were incapacitated in a matter of seconds.

For a moment Harry was confused as to where the other three had gotten extra wands when the realisation struck him. They had given up phoney wands; Lucius never bothered to verify that they were real. Harry pulled off the hood of his cloak and nodded at Minerva's surprised face. Turning, he saw Remus, Tonks, and Ben sprinting down the hall towards them. Just then, a commotion sounded from one of the rooms, and Harry was reminded that there were more Death Eaters to be dealt with. He looked intently into Minerva's eyes and cocked his head at the room. She gave him a fractional nod as Harry flipped his hood back up and went to investigate.

Harry saw Kingsley kneel down beside Bill but was unable to determine Bill's condition as he forced his concentration forward into the room. He opened the door as quietly as possible, but, for all the good it did him, he may as well have kicked it in. Though he was invisible, a torrent of spells was launched the second the door opened. Seeing an opening, Harry ducked in and stepped out of the way of the curses, doing his best to stay quiet and light on his feet.

He manoeuvred his way around the perimeter of the room, careful not to touch anything lest he give away his presence. There were six Death Eaters in the room, and they were all facing the doorway.

Harry slowly made his way past the Death Eaters and turned to face their backs. It was as he was turning that Harry noticed something that made his heart drop into his stomach: Neville's mother. She had just sat up in her bed and looked around as though surveying her surroundings. One of the Death Eaters noticed her movement and turned to fire a curse at her, but Harry beat him to it, knocking the man off his feet with a quick Stunner.

Unfortunately, two of the Death Eaters in the room had turned at the motion of their comrade and noticed Harry's spell. While they still could not see him, they knew roughly where he was and began firing spells his way. Harry was able to knock out one of the other Death Eaters before the rest turned their attention towards him.

Harry dropped to the ground to avoid the barrage of spells. He rolled underneath one of the beds and took aim at the legs of two different Death Eaters. One noticed the spell just in time to throw up a shield; the other was not so lucky. He had to roll quickly to the side as several spells flew his way. One connected with the bed making Harry very glad it was unoccupied.

His Invisibility Cloak rode up on his legs as he rolled, giving his position away to his attackers. Harry jumped up to his feet and just sidestepped a Killing Curse when one of his foes fell suddenly. Harry spared a brief glance at the door to see Remus throwing another spell at one of the two standing Death Eaters.

With Remus in the fray and only two Death Eaters left, Harry was able to relax slightly and focus more on offence. He managed to trip up and disarm one of the men and then stunned him for good measure. Harry turned to the last Death Eater and watched as the man blocked a spell from Remus with his wand hand while his other reached into his robes. Harry quickly shot an Impedimenta at the man, but he was too slow. Just before the spell reached its mark, Harry saw the man's arm jerk, and he disappeared – along with the five Death Eaters on the ground.

Tonks' exclamation of "Bloody hell!" confirmed Harry's suspicion that the Death Eaters in the hall had disappeared as well. At least they had thought to put up the anti-portkey wards on the ones downstairs.

As the danger passed, Harry felt his energy drain off of him. He felt bone-weary and had to put his hand on a nearby bedpost to steady himself for a moment. Every inch of his body ached. He wanted nothing more than to just crawl into a bed and remain there for days, but that was not an option. He lifted the hood of his cloak fully off his head and looked at Remus. The two men stared at each other in silence for a long moment. Harry was unsure what to say or do. He knew he should not linger. He needed to get out of there and back to the castle as soon as possible, yet he was wary of leaving things unsettled with Remus. He needed to make sure Remus would keep his secret, at least until they had a chance to talk things over.

As the silence stretched on, Harry could finally take no more. He stepped forward and said, "Remus..." he paused at a loss for words before finding himself again. "I know I owe you an explanation, but I need to get out of here."

"I think you have some questions to answer first," Remus replied evenly, not moving an inch.

Harry stopped to study him. "We can't now. If anyone finds out..." he left the statement hanging in the air. "I need to get out of here before too many questions are asked and before anyone misses me."

"Why should I help you keep your secret?" Remus asked in a harsh whisper. "You nearly got yourself killed tonight."

"Because you know very well that I can fight as well or better than most of the Order," Harry fired back. "Listen, you don't have to make a decision now, just promise me you'll wait until we can talk things over."

There was a short moment of silence interrupted as Tonks called out for Remus.

Remus looked at the still-open door then back at Harry. "Meet me in the shack Tuesday night. I'll keep quiet until then."

“Thank you,” Harry said as he flipped his hood back up and disappeared from view.

Not a moment later, Tonks stuck her head in the doorway. “There you are,” she called as she spotted Remus. Harry slowly backed out of the way as Tonks walked into the room. He carefully made his way to the door and paused as she asked, “What happened to your friend, Jim?” Her tone of voice made her feelings for Jim perfectly clear.

“Disappeared,” Remus responded. “Right after the Death Eaters. He must have had a portkey or something.”

Harry sighed silently and began to walk silently out the door. Not knowing whether or not it was safe to Apparate, he thought it best to leave the hospital first. Just as he was exiting the room, he heard Remus ask, “Is Bill okay?”

Harry froze in mid-step. How could he have forgotten about Bill? Not only was he practically family, he was also Ginny’s brother. Harry did not so much as breathe as he awaited Tonks’ response.

“He’s pretty banged up, but he’ll pull through.”

Harry felt his body relax as a long breath left his lungs. Reassured in the knowledge that Bill would be okay, he walked out the door and manoeuvred his way around the loitering Order members, making his way down the stairs and back into the lobby. He stepped through the exit leading into Muggle London without running into another soul and proceeded to Apparate back to Hogsmeade where he ditched his disguise before wearily transforming into an owl and taking flight towards the castle.

He quickly made his way down to his office where he planned to take a quick shower. Truth be told, he wanted nothing more than to skip the shower and collapse into his bed, but he needed to erase any evidence of his involvement in the battle.

He opened the door of his office and stepped inside. He was surprised to find Ginny waiting there for him. As he saw her staring

past him with a hopeful look on her face, Harry found himself suddenly overcome with emotion. Throwing off his Invisibility Cloak, he rushed forward to envelop her in his arms. Ginny returned the embrace just as fiercely, holding onto Harry as if for dear life.

Harry felt his head spinning as the events of the evening caught up with him. He had thought he would never get a chance to see Ginny again, and now that he had her back in his arms, he never wanted to let her go. He kissed the top of her head and held her tightly, too choked up to say a word.

He had no idea how long they stood there in their embrace, nor how many times he pressed his lips into her hair against her head. It was only when he was suddenly overcome by the need to feel her lips pressed against his that he eased his grip on her. And even as she began to pull away, he pulled her back in, ducking his head down to kiss her.

She kissed him back for a short minute but eventually pulled her lips away from his. Undeterred, Harry kissed along her jaw, her neck, her cheeks – placing desperate kisses on any piece of skin his lips could find. “Harry, what’s gotten into you?” Ginny asked breathlessly. “What happened?”

With some effort, Harry began to rein in his emotions. He held her cheek in his hand, stroking her skin with his thumb as he stepped back from her. He felt the back of his legs brush against the sofa, and he let go of her face as he allowed himself to fall back. He closed his eyes without even thinking about it and did not open them until Ginny’s voice again permeated the air. “Harry?” she asked, her tone laced with concern.

He opened his eyes and turned his head to find that she was sitting beside him. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I just – I needed to be close to you. And I needed to kiss you.”

Ginny reached her hand out to cup his cheek and then let it fall down to his side where she clasped his hand.

Taking a moment to compose himself and his thoughts, Harry continued, "I had a bit of a close call tonight," he admitted to her, wary of her reaction yet wanting to be completely honest with her.

He felt as much as heard her sharp intake of air. "How close?" she asked, her voice a harsh whisper.

Harry sighed and resigned himself to explaining the night's activities in detail. He left nothing out. When he told her about being held under the Cruciatus Curse, he felt her hand squeeze his. When he explained just how close he had come to his death, her grip had tightened painfully. She gasped when he revealed that Remus had found him out, but she never interrupted him as he continued the story.

She did not interrupt him, that is, until he mentioned Bill's name. He hastily assured her that he was okay if a bit banged up, and she sagged against him at that revelation. He slipped an arm around her as he continued his story, ending with his short talk with Remus and their scheduled meeting Tuesday night.

When Harry had finished speaking, they sat on the couch in silence for several minutes. Just as Harry's eyelids began to droop and his exhaustion began to claim him, he felt a sudden jolt and was suddenly quite aware of his surroundings, only they were not the surroundings he expected to find.

"Tell me how it is that you could possibly have failed me so completely!" Voldemort demanded. "Weeks of careful planning and preparation, and you let yourselves be bested by that Muggle-loving fool's incompetent lackeys."

"My Lord," Malfoy pleaded as he prostrated himself before his master. "They were there too soon; they must have known. We did not have time to..."

"You did not have time?" Voldemort's voice was a harsh whisper. "Tell me, how long did it take you to arrive?" He paused as if waiting for a response but continued on before one could be given. "Your

excuses have exhausted my patience, Lucius.” Voldemort languidly reached into his robes to draw out his wand. He revelled in the fear he felt exuding off his servants. Here there were some of the most powerful and influential wizards in the nation cowering before him – not lifting a finger in defence. That was true power. “Crucio,” he hissed, as Malfoy’s body collapsed before him, twitching on the ground as the man struggled unsuccessfully to contain his scream.

Harry felt his scar erupt in pain, but he struggled to contain the feeling. His body was back at Hogwarts. He was in Voldemort’s mind. They were separate, if still connected. He pushed the sensations away as well as he could and concentrated on remaining invisible. He was only partially successful, but it appeared to be enough as Voldemort did not appear to take notice of his presence.

After a long minute, Voldemort lifted the curse, taking a moment to survey his servants. “Perhaps you are correct, Lucius. Perhaps there is a spy among us.” The Death Eaters all shrank back a step at that statement, their fear evident. Harry concentrated as a few names drifted across Voldemort’s mind. Most of the names Harry had never heard, but he recognised a few. Snape’s name came up as well, and Voldemort lingered on it. Snape was the most logical choice even if his loyalty had been proven in the past. He was in the best position, and his Occlumency skills were impressive.

The beginnings of a plan began to form in Voldemort’s head, but he shunted the matter aside for the moment. He had other matters to deal with right now, particularly the punishment of many more servants. Voldemort barely addressed the cloaked figures before the tortures began. Harry felt his scar sear in pain yet again, and he struggled to separate himself from Voldemort. It was a long couple minutes of agony before he felt himself falling away and jerked back to awareness in his own body.

Ginny was there with him, her arms wrapped around him securely. He held onto her tightly as he struggled to regain control over his breathing. It would seem this was becoming a regular occurrence for them, Harry absently mused, but he knew it was merely a bad coincidence. He released his grip on Ginny and pulled back from her.

“Are you all right?” she asked in a whisper.

“I will be,” Harry replied. “I just need some sleep, but first, I need to get cleaned up. You should go get some sleep.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said, leaning back in her seat.

Harry was about to insist that she go to bed, but he decided not to bother. It was a pointless argument, and he really did not have the energy for it anyway. He pulled out his trunk and climbed inside, heading straight for the shower.

OoOoO

The second Harry disappeared into his trunk, Ginny lost her tenuous hold on her emotions. A sob escaped against her will as tears began to trail down her cheeks. Her worst fear had very nearly been realised. She curled her legs up to her body and let go, allowing her emotions the release they so desperately sought.

She could not fathom what she would do if she lost Harry. She knew the dangers he put himself in. Every time he left the castle, fear and worry gripped her heart. It was this more than anything that pushed her to begin training with Harry. She could not sit idly by while he risked his life. She needed to be there with him, to make sure he was okay.

She did not begrudge Harry his involvement in the war. She felt that same pull. And unlike her, he took the initiative to prepare himself long ago. She, like many others, wanted to contribute, but she had never been willing to put forward the effort – not until she had seen Harry’s example. That was the crux of it; she needed Harry.

So many of them did. It was Harry, after all, who was teaching their HA classes. It was Harry giving them the tools they would need to survive the war. Harry was the only person they could count on to take them seriously and to teach them how to fight. Harry was the one who constantly pushed her. It was Harry who believed in her and offered encouragement at every misstep.

But she needed Harry so much more than that. He was her best friend. He was the only person she could be completely honest with – the only person who could understand her. And she almost lost him. She hugged her knees tightly to her chest. Her eyes were clamped shut, and she did nothing to stem the flow of tears. She could not imagine her life without Harry in it.

So consumed was she that she did not notice as Harry reemerged from his trunk. She did not hear his footsteps as he padded over to the sofa. But she heard clearly the ache in his voice as he said her name. “Ginny.”

She felt the shift in the sofa as he sat beside her, and she allowed him to gather her in his arms. She felt stupid and silly to be caught crying, and yet now that she had let the tears flow, she could not stop them. She burrowed deeper into Harry’s embrace, seeking the reassurance of his warmth – the strength and solidity of his body.

“Shh,” he tenderly whispered. “It’s all right. I’m okay. Bill’s okay.”

She could not stop the sob that was wrenched from her throat. Harry tightened his hold on her and pressed his lips to the top of her head. They stayed in that position for several minutes while Ginny struggled to regain her composure. As she began to get a handle on her tears, she felt her body relax, and, in turn, Harry’s grip relaxed as well.

She wanted nothing more than to remain with him, yet she knew that she and, more importantly, Harry needed their sleep. Wiping the last of her tears with her sleeve, she extricated herself from Harry’s embrace. She felt him hesitate before letting his arms fall to his sides, and she looked up into his eyes from beside him. His eyes were red, and she could just see the track left by a single tear that had traced its way down his cheek where it now rested at his jaw.

With a soft sigh, she rose up onto her feet, holding her hands out to Harry. “Come on. I’ve kept you up long enough. You need to get your sleep.”

Harry grabbed both her hands. As he stood, he dropped her hands and encircled her in his arms once again. It was with great reluctance a moment later that they broke apart to walk back up to Gryffindor Tower where, after one final kiss, they separated to their respective dormitories to try to get in a couple hours of sleep.

OoOoO

Morning came much too quickly for Harry. He had not fallen asleep quickly, unable to erase the image of Ginny crying the night before. He wanted so desperately to be with her, to hold her in his arms, both for her sake and for his. Even having opted to skip his morning workout routine, he was still exhausted that morning, having only experienced a sparse couple hours of troubled sleep. Now more than ever he regretted his overindulgence of Invigoration Draught the week prior; otherwise, he would be able to take a dose to help him through the day. Now, however, he was forced to suffer sans potion.

Breakfast was a relatively subdued affair. Harry was too tired and distracted for conversation, and the meal passed slowly by until it was time to head to Transfiguration. Throughout the class, Harry struggled just to remain awake as Professor McGonagall lectured them about something or another – Harry was too tired even to grasp the basic topic at hand. He was only mildly surprised when after the bell, the Professor asked to see him.

Harry was dreading the conversation, knowing that she had no doubt noticed his inattentiveness. He was faintly surprised when, after the door to the classroom closed, the first words out of her mouth were spoken with an almost affectionate concern. “Are you all right, Harry? You don’t seem very well today.”

“Sorry Professor,” Harry replied. “I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“It’s Minerva, Harry,” she corrected lightly before asking, “Is it visions?”

“Most of the time,” Harry answered. “Sometimes it’s just dreams, but last night... Last night I had two visions.” He looked at her levelly and found that she did not seem the least bit surprised, not that she should considering she was at St. Mungo’s. “I had one before the attack, and I ran down to Professor Dumbledore’s office to warn him. I had trouble falling asleep afterwards, and when I did, I had yet another vision. Voldemort was not too happy.”

“I thought that might be the problem,” she said. “I want you to visit Madame Pomfrey in the hospital wing after your last class. I’ll let her know to expect you and to have a Dreamless Sleep Potion prepared for you. You’re in no shape to get any work done this evening anyway, and the extra sleep will do you good.”

Harry nodded his head knowing that she was correct. Loathe as he was to skip his training in the afternoon, he knew he lacked the energy for it.

“And I want you to let me know if you continue to experience trouble sleeping. We can’t give you a Dreamless Sleep Potion every night or you’ll risk dependency, but there are other avenues we can look into.”

“Thank you,” Harry stated, genuinely warmed by her offer and her concern.

She smiled at him as she laid a hand on his shoulder. “You’re welcome.”

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower where he spent the rest of the time before lunch engaged in a game of exploding snap with Ron and Neville. Hermione questioned Harry at lunch about what Professor McGonagall wanted to talk to him about, so Harry told his friends that he had not slept well the night before and that she had noticed his drowsiness. His lack of sleep led to more questions, and he was unable to avoid the topic of his visions. He did not let on how often he had them, only that he had experienced two the previous night, which was why he was so disoriented.

Wary of the crowd around them, nobody asked for any specific details about either vision, for which Harry was thankful. He really had no desire to discuss them at that moment. He knew he needed to tell Dumbledore about his second vision, but there was no great rush, except to warn Dumbledore that Voldemort suspected a spy. As long as they could keep Voldemort from truly suspecting Snape – though a part of Harry was not all that concerned about the Potions professor's well-being – it could actually work to their advantage. If Voldemort's attention was focused on the possibility of a spy, the attacks might slow down.

At any rate, the news could hold off for a day at least. Now all Harry had to do was make it through Care of Magical Creatures before visiting Madame Pomfrey and sleeping the rest of the day away. Of course, with a homicidal griffin as the subject matter, that was easier said than done. Harry tried once again to communicate with the creature, sending an image of himself gently running his fingers through the feathers on the griffin's head and neck as Fawkes seemed to enjoy.

He gave up trying when the griffin bit off the hand of the illusionary Harry. Other than that minor glitch, the class went by relatively smoothly. His curiosity in the griffin helped keep him alert throughout the class, and before long he was packing up to head to the hospital wing. Madame Pomfrey had a dose of the potion ready for him when he arrived. She informed him that the draught would put him out for at least twelve hours, probably more. She then proceeded to give him a short lesson about the dangers of taking too much Dreamless Sleep Potion and the risks of addiction and dependency should he use it too often.

Having previously read all about the potion, Harry only paid enough attention to nod and give his agreement in the right places. He left for his dormitory with a full flask in hand after promising the matron that he would not detour along the way and that he would ingest its entire contents right away.

Harry took a minute to sort through his memories for the day before downing the liquid and sinking back into his bed. His last thought

before sleep claimed him was one of regret that he did not get the opportunity to wish Ginny good night.

Harry was up early the next morning feeling refreshed and invigorated. He awoke a full hour before he normally would, so he took the opportunity to get some work done prior to his workout with Ginny. As he worked on an essay for Potions, he could not keep his mind from wandering off topic. There was one particular person upon whom it was intent to dwell, frustrating Harry to no end.

Harry was set to meet Remus that night in the Shrieking Shack, and he was quite worried about how the encounter would go. On the one hand, he trusted Remus. He had no doubt in his mind that Remus would always act with Harry's best interests at heart. While that was all well and good, Harry feared that Remus' concern for Harry's well-being would interfere with his judgment.

The fact that he had been able to convince Remus to keep his secret until they had a chance to talk gave Harry some hope. It meant he was at least willing to hear Harry out and consider the matter before making his decision, but that also meant that Harry would have to convince Remus to keep the secret, which would involve revealing a lot more secrets. If he did not reveal more, Remus was sure to tell Dumbledore and the Order. If he revealed his secrets and Remus still chose to give him up, however, Harry would be in even worse condition.

It was not a good situation. With his mind so distracted, he did not notice when Ginny descended into the common room until he heard her voice as her hand touched his shoulder. "Harry?"

He nearly jumped out of his seat in shock and had to take a moment to regain his bearings.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked in concern. "Didn't you sleep well last night?"

"Yes," Harry responded. "I slept very well, actually. I was just lost in my thoughts."

“What were you thinking about?” she asked as she leaned over him to look at the scroll and book on the desk. “Something tells me it had nothing to do with Potions.”

Harry hesitated half a second in his response, holding his head in his hands and running his fingers through his hair, staring off into nothing. “I was just thinking about Remus. I’m supposed to meet him tonight, and I’m worried how things will go.”

“Understandable.”

“Would you...” He paused and turned to look up into her eyes. “Would you come with me?”

“Sure,” Ginny replied. “If that’s what you want.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

The day crawled by at a flobberworm’s pace for Harry. He found himself constantly distracted by thoughts of that evening. His anxiety built as the day progressed, every minute bringing him closer to the inevitable encounter. He paid for his distraction in Potions as he was not paying attention and either made a mistake in his potion or otherwise failed to notice one of Malfoy’s sabotage attempts. Regardless of the cause of his failed potion, Harry was treated with a ten minute monologue on his incompetence and ineptness from Snape.

With that little hitch out of the way, the rest of the day passed without incident. Harry had not set any specific time to meet Remus, but he thought it safe to assume they would meet around the time they usually did on a full moon. His BHA class that evening was especially rough, but he forced himself to concentrate and was able to make it through.

Afterwards, he gave up on getting any sort of work done and asked Ron for a game of chess. It proved to be a decent diversion as he was free to let his mind wander while Ron carefully planned his

strategy. The fact that Harry was beaten quite thoroughly in each game aroused absolutely no suspicion since it happened every time he played Ron.

When the time began to grow late, Harry made his excuses and headed up to his dorm. He set up his usual illusion and grabbed his Invisibility Cloak as a precaution. Opening the window, Harry transformed into an owl and flew out into the brisk night air. Wary of the branches of the Whomping Willow, Harry flew swiftly into the opening at the base of the enchanted tree.

He waited there for a few minutes before he heard Ginny's spell depress the knot just outside the tunnel's entrance. He held his hand out to her as she approached and, as her invisible hand gripped his, guided her down the slight slope. As she removed her Invisibility Cloak, he greeted her with a quick kiss. "Hi."

"Hey," she replied. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Harry responded with a slight quirk to his smile.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Oh come on. There's no sense worrying over something you can't control. Besides, Remus kept the secret of your Animagus form. I'm sure we can convince him to keep this one as well."

"I hope you're right."

With that the two set off. The tunnel was too narrow to walk side by side, so Harry led the way with Ginny trailing close behind. As they walked along, Harry, for what seemed like the thousandth time that day, began rehearsing what he would say to Remus. An idle fear gripped him that when confronted he would forget all his arguments, so he quickly ran through each one over and over until the tunnel began to rise and Harry was confronted with a door in the ceiling.

Exhaling deeply, Harry grabbed the rung and pushed up.

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Remus paced back and forth impatiently over the already worn floor. For what seemed like the thousandth time, he glanced down at his watch. Harry was due to arrive any minute. Despite the fact that he had suspected him for quite some time, Remus still had a hard time grasping the fact that Harry was Jim – that Harry had managed to sneak out on his own at least four times now to fight Death Eaters.

There were so many questions to answer before any of it added up. How was Harry even able to perform magic outside of Hogwarts without drawing the Ministry's attention? Where did he learn to Apparate? Where in Merlin's name did he learn to fight like that? The question of why was an easy one. It was in Harry's nature to get involved, to try to stop something wrong or bad. It was one of Harry's most endearing and frustrating qualities.

Remus had absolutely no idea what he intended to do after this little meeting. That would depend largely on what he learned from Harry. Part of him insisted that Harry needed to be protected, even against his will, but another part was willing to look objectively at the situation. Harry could fight, plain and simple, and right now they needed all the help they could get. He had already proven himself capable, of that there could be no dispute.

That is what made the situation so difficult. If he was not so effective in battle, it would be easy to just say he was too young and inexperienced to be involved in the fighting. Harry, however, would be involved in the war whether or not he was directly involved in the fighting. Voldemort would go after Harry regardless.

Then there was the prophecy. Remus was not privy to its full contents, but he was able to put two and two together as well as anyone else. It was clear Harry had a major part to play in the war. Perhaps Harry needed to be involved.

In all his pacing and musings, Remus had paid little attention to his surroundings. It was the sound of the trapdoor opening that finally managed to pull him out of his head. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the newly revealed entrance as Harry's head popped

through. Their eyes met, and he could immediately tell that Harry was just as nervous and anxious for this meeting as he was.

He was only mildly surprised when, after Harry had stepped out of the trap door, Ginny's face appeared behind him. So she knew. He had wondered whether or not Harry had confided in her fully. Once Ginny had climbed out of the tunnel, Harry closed the trap door with a thud that reverberated throughout the otherwise silent room. No greetings were exchanged as Remus surveyed Harry, and the two teens surveyed him.

The silence pervaded the room as the sound of the door faded into nothingness. Remus was not even sure what to say or ask – where to begin. He opened his mouth several times, but no words came to him.

Finally, Harry spoke. "Thank you for agreeing to meet me."

Remus looked squarely into his eyes as he responded. "I owe you that much at least."

Harry nodded and hesitated for a moment. Ginny sidled up next to him, taking his hand in hers, and Harry turned to smile at her before refocusing on Remus. "Do you want to start or should I?"

"I think you better," Remus said at once. "I can't even think where to begin."

"Well," Harry began, "I guess the first thing you probably need to know is that I discovered I'm rather good at wandless magic."

"Wandless magic?" Remus repeated unconsciously. Whatever he had expected Harry to say, he was not prepared for that statement.

"This could take some time," Harry stated. "Maybe we better all sit down."

Remus nodded and reached for his wand when Harry held out his hand to interrupt him. "Allow me."

With a wave of his hand, an armchair and a settee materialised in the centre of the room. Harry led Ginny into the latter, and, after gaping wordlessly for a moment, Remus walked over to the other, sinking back into the comfortable chair.

“How did you...?” he began to ask once he had seated himself, but the question died on his lips.

“How did I learn to do wandless magic?” Harry asked for him. Remus nodded. “Well, two summers ago, you remember when I was attacked by Dementors in Little Whinging?” Again, Remus nodded. “My cousin, Dudley, had punched me, thinking I was playing some trick on him, and I dropped my wand. It was so dark that I couldn’t see where it went; meanwhile the Dementors were rapidly closing in on us, and, in my panic, I said “Lumos” while desperately wishing for some light. My wand lit up.”

Remus furrowed his brow wondering why Harry had never brought this up in the past, but before he could ask, Harry resumed his explanation.

“At the time I didn’t think much of it. There was so much else going on that I completely forgot all about it. But then I learned how difficult it is for the average wizard to perform wandless magic, even a spell as simple as Lumos. When I learned that, I began experimenting with it and, after some trial and error and a whole lot of practice, I managed to get the mechanics down to where any spell I could cast with a wand, I could also do without one. As I continued to practice, it became easier and more natural until I was casting spells more quickly and efficiently than I ever did with a wand.”

Remus felt his eyebrows slowly rising up his forehead as Harry continued his story. A stolen wand he had suspected. He had briefly considered that perhaps Harry had found some way to break the tracking charm on his wand. But wandless magic? Never in his wildest dreams.

“When I learned that the Ministry tracked spell-use based on the wand and not the wizard, I knew it was safe to practice over the

summer.” Remus smiled ruefully as he realised that he had quite freely given away that piece of information to Harry.

“And that’s when I got the idea to try casting two spells at once.”

Remus’ thoughts derailed. “Two spells?” he uttered.

Harry nodded. “At first I was only casting the same spell in both hands at the same time, but I was eventually able to get it so that I could cast two different spells simultaneously.”

Remus was not sure he had ever seen Dumbledore cast two spells at once, but then again he may have been so surreptitious about it that there was no way you could tell even if he had.

“I was training throughout the summer, and I’ve been using the Room of Requirement to train every day since school started back up in September. Oh, and I still run and work out every morning as well.”

Harry paused in his explanation, giving Remus a moment to process everything he had just been told, but Remus knew it would take a lot longer than a few minutes to do that. And yet there was still so much left unexplained.

“Where did you learn to Apparate?” he asked.

Harry did not immediately answer. Instead, he looked to Ginny, who looked back at him, serious expressions on both faces as they seemed to communicate with just a look. After a short moment, Harry turned back and, after clearing his throat, said, “That’s a little difficult to explain.”

‘That is a little difficult to explain?’ Remus thought to himself incredulously. If that was more difficult to explain than his proficiency in wandless magic, he was not so sure he wanted to know. He wondered if his brain could handle it, yet he thought he might explode if he did not hear the answer soon.

“I’ve got time,” he eventually responded.

Harry did not seem particularly pleased to hear that. Remus noticed as Ginny's hand found its way to Harry's leg just above his knee where she began to run her fingers back and forth. After a short moment, it seemed to have a noticeable effect on Harry, soothing him. Swallowing heavily, Harry began speaking, "What would you say if I said that Sirius taught me?"

It was surprising, but given the fact that he had started Harry on the Animagus transformation in secret, it was not all that big a shock that he had included Apparition lessons as well. At least, Remus was not all that shocked until Harry finished. "Last summer."

Remus felt as if he had just been punched in the stomach. Then, with a sudden realisation, he unconsciously said, "No. It couldn't be." He stared at Harry for a long moment before turning away and continuing quietly to himself, "It couldn't have been real." There's no way it could have been real. Sirius died. He saw it happen. There was no coming back. He turned back and looked steadily into Harry's eyes, whose gaze did not falter in the slightest. "What do you mean?" he finally asked.

Harry sighed. "He sort of visited me in my sleep," he explained with a half shrug. "I don't know how to explain it better than that. He said he was stuck in a place between the living and the dead for a time, and that while he was there, he could visit my dreams."

"Just your dreams?" Remus queried anxiously.

"Well, no. I think he said anyone he had been particularly close to in life," Harry answered with his brow slightly furrowed. "Why?"

"Just curious," Remus hastily responded. "Tell me more."

"It was a bit weird, but we could control the environment to an extent, and we were able to use magic as if we were in the real world. He helped me train over the summer and into the school year. He – uh," Harry paused and swallowed. Remus noticed Ginny's fingers tighten around Harry's thigh. "He moved on a little over a month ago."

Remus was quick to notice the correlation between when Sirius supposedly passed on and when he had his own encounter with his deceased friend. "So Sirius taught you to Apparate then, in this dream world?" he asked, though he knew that was exactly what Harry had said.

"Yes," Harry stated, though his tone made it clear that he did not think Remus would believe him.

Remus noticed Ginny whisper something to Harry, though he could not make out what it was. She kissed him on the cheek and settled back at his side. Harry turned and looked adoringly at her for a moment before refocusing his attention.

"So then you learned to Apparate wandlessly as well?" Remus asked for clarification.

"Yes."

Remus nodded. He knew he needed to tell Harry about his meeting with Sirius, but he was somehow reluctant to do so. He had hardly dared to allow himself to even consider the possibility that it had been real before that moment. He needed time to reevaluate the situation, yet he knew after all Harry had just shared with him, that he owed it to Harry at least that much.

"He – I mean Sirius – he – uh, well," Remus began, taking a deep, steadying breath before finishing. "He visited me once, I think just before he passed on."

Remus felt as much as heard Harry's sharp intake of breath. "What did he say?" Harry asked in a tightly controlled voice.

"Not much, unfortunately," Remus responded. "Basically just that, when the time came, I should trust you." He decided to leave off what Sirius had implied about Harry's strength and ability. Even though Sirius had not told him anything specific, he thought it best not to call Sirius' loyalty to Harry into question.

Harry relaxed noticeably at his words. A moment later, a small smirk appeared on his face as he asked, "So how did you finally figure it out?"

"Well, it was mostly the panther form, like I said," Remus answered. "Though I did get thrown for a loop when Dumbledore said one of you had a bird Animagus."

"One of us?" Harry inquired.

"Oh," Remus said, smacking himself lightly upside the head. "The Order and Dumbledore think you're actually two people." Remus stopped as Harry and Ginny turned to each other and abruptly burst out in laughter. He too joined in, though much less enthusiastically.

"They – they think that – that I'm two people?" Harry asked in between fits as his laughter began to wind down.

"I did too, for a short time," Remus added. "I figured if it was you, then your partner in crime was obvious." He gave an unnecessary nod at Ginny. "But things never quite added up, and when the bird Animagus theory came up, I didn't know quite what to think. I guess they were just wrong about that."

Harry and Ginny shared a short, conspiratory glance, but neither commented.

"So what do you plan to do now?" Harry asked after a moment.

A sigh escaped Remus' lips as he felt his shoulders sag. "I don't know," he said tiredly. "This is quite a bit to swallow." Remus paused a moment before an idea struck him. "What would you do, in my shoes?"

Harry's expression mirrored his puzzlement at the strange question. "Honestly? I'd try to remember what it was like for me growing up when people refused to look past my age to the person I am. It's not

our age that defines us.” Sirius’s parting message rang in his ears at Harry’s statement.

I know he is still so young, but don’t let his age cloud your vision the way it has Dumbledore and so many others.

He shook his head clear as Harry continued. “I wish I could just be another kid, Remus, with only school and my girlfriend and Quidditch to worry about, but I can’t. I’ll be a part of this war regardless of what anyone wants, so, to me, it makes more sense to work with me rather than against me.”

Remus nodded. “And what about you?” he said, turning his focus to Ginny. “What do you think of all this?”

She sat up a bit, pulling her hand from Harry’s leg up to her hair. “It’s not easy watching Harry go, knowing the danger he will be putting himself in. But where would I be if it weren’t for him? Dead, twice over.” The frankness with which she spoke struck Remus, and he realised her intentions before she had a chance to voice them. “There’s nothing harder in the world than sitting in the castle while Harry, you, and my family fight this war. I support him because I understand where he’s coming from and because I have every intention of fighting alongside him – as soon as I can.”

It was Harry now, Remus saw, who offered the comforting hand to Ginny. He knew he was not sitting across from an ordinary teenage couple. Their maturity shone in their relationship and in the way they held themselves, and the strength of their convictions was clear. Despite their ages, Remus knew that sitting across from him were two adults – a mature, loving couple.

It was almost like stepping back in time, watching James and Lily together shortly after their seventh year at Hogwarts. They needed only to switch Harry’s eyes with Ginny, and he would hardly be able to tell the difference. He marvelled at how this development could have happened so quickly and so completely out of notice. Was he that blinded by their ages that he had not noticed previously?

When Remus learned of Harry's relationship with Ginny, he had been happy for them. His experiences with the two of them had shown that the two cared for each other and shared a strong bond, but for the first time he was able to truly appreciate the depth of their relationship.

And so, with that insight, Remus knew there was only one course of action he could take. Almost dreading the words as they formed on his tongue, he asked, "How can I help?"

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Harry stared blankly at Remus a moment before the words caught up in his mind. "You mean you won't tell Dumbledore or the Order?" he asked quickly, hardly believing it could be possible.

Not for the first time that evening, Remus heaved a weary sigh before responding. "No, I won't reveal your identity at this time. There may come a time when I will have little or no choice, but I will do my best to keep your secret as long as I can – and as long as you are safe."

A wide smile stretched across Harry's face. He turned and gave Ginny a brief kiss, laughing to himself in relief. "Thank you, Remus."

Remus shrugged, responding, "You made a valid point. I shouldn't judge you based on your age, and that would be the only reason to try to stop you. You've already proven yourself, as far as I'm concerned."

Harry could not have been happier. It was such a huge relief after all the anxiety the last two days had brought him. If he was completely honest with himself, it was comforting to share his secrets with Remus. He hated lying to his friends and sneak around all the time. He would still have to do that, only to one less person.

"Will you keep me posted on what's going on with the Order?" Harry asked hopefully. He had planned on asking Fred and George for that favour when they made it in, but Remus would provide a much better source as nobody would suspect him of any sort of duplicity.

“I suppose I can do that,” Remus replied. “Though I think it would be best never to do so via owl post, so you may only get updates once a month.” Harry nodded understandingly, and Remus continued, “Now what do you want to do about your alternate persona, Jim?”

Harry tapped his chin as he thought it over. “I think we should encourage them to think of me as two people. The next time we end up in battle together, I’ll slip up and reveal that I don’t work alone.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” Remus cut in. “At least, don’t make it obvious. Right now they think you’re trying to confuse us as well as the Death Eaters. They think it likely that you have an identical twin and that we’ve actually seen the both of you – just never at the same time.”

“Oh,” Harry replied. “Well that makes sense then.” He pondered the situation for a long moment before Ginny spoke up.

“Well, if the Order already thinks that each of you has a different Animagus form,” she said to Harry, “and if you technically don’t know that they’re aware of either of those Animagus forms, maybe you could try to confirm the two different Animagi theories.” There was a suggestive lilt to her voice that Harry did not miss. She was clearly hesitant of revealing Harry’s second form to Remus, though she seemed to think it would be a good idea to do so, and to use his two forms to his advantage.

“Well, I get how he would do the panther, obviously, but how are we going to confirm the bird Animagus?” Remus inquired.

Harry smiled sheepishly as he answered, “Well, you see, the thing is that I sort of have two Animagus forms.”

He watched as Remus lurched forward, his head falling hard into his hands as his thumbs began to idly rub at his temples. Harry worried that something might be wrong when Remus suddenly looked up.

“Two? You have two Animagus forms?” Remus stood and began pacing back and forth across the worn floor.

Harry tracked his progress with his eyes. "Yes."

"Unbelievable." The word was said so quietly that Harry nearly missed it. Remus abruptly ceased his pacing and turned to Harry. "How...just how?"

Harry shrugged. "When I took the potion, I had two different visions: one as a panther, the other as an owl." Harry thought about adding in the fact that he could communicate with other owls as well but thought Remus might implode if he revealed that secret right now.

"Okay," Remus said to himself, then again to the others. "Okay. The Order is already sure of the panther form thanks to Ginny here. The owl form they only heard about second-hand from Snape who had heard it from one of the Death Eaters who was at Amelia Bones' residence, and he apparently had not actually seen you transform. But again, you want to be secretive, so don't show it off. When you have an opportunity, show up at a scene in the owl form and fly around in plain sight, but fly off somewhere hidden when you transform."

"All right," Harry agreed.

"And even if you ever need to show your panther form, always take the name Jim," Remus continued. "You're trying to make yourself out to be one person."

"Right."

"Right," Remus parroted. "Any other big surprises?"

"No," Harry said smilingly as he stood from his seat, offering Ginny a hand up as well. "I think that'll do for tonight. Gotta save something for next time, right?"

"I hope you're kidding," Remus stated in a deadpan.

Harry only shrugged in response, and Remus shook his head. The smile faded from Harry's face as he adopted a more serious tone. "Thank you, Remus. I know I'm asking a lot of you, and I want you to know that I appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Harry. It's the least I can do," he replied. When Harry moved to speak up again, Remus held out a hand. "I mean it. It may not seem like much to you, but the fact that you're here with me every full moon is a very big thing to me. And beyond that, I owe it to James and Lily... and Sirius. This was Sirius' last request of me, and I have no intention of letting him down."

Harry felt a sudden prickling behind his eyelids at Remus' words. Overcome suddenly with emotion, he stepped forward and embraced Remus. It took only a second before he felt Remus return the hug. A moment later, their arms relaxed, and Harry took a step back.

"Just do me one favour, Harry," Remus said, with one hand lingering on Harry's shoulder. Harry looked him straight in the eye as Remus continued. "Don't get too reckless. Wait for us to arrive before you rush into things." There was no judgment or condescension in his tone, and Harry knew he was not trying to belittle or even make demands of him. He was just asking for a little common sense.

"I learned my lesson," Harry answered. "I'll be more careful from now on."

"Good." Remus let his hand fall from Harry's shoulder, and his gaze shifted past Harry as he continued, "Ginny, it was a pleasure as always."

Harry looked over his shoulder to see her smile in response. "It was nice to see you too. And thank you, both for Harry and for me."

Remus chuckled humourlessly. "Well, I can't say I'm eager to see you out there, but I hope all goes well in your training."

"Thank you," she replied, stepping up beside Harry and slipping her hand in the crook of his elbow.

Harry turned back to face Remus. "Well, I guess we'll see you in a couple weeks if not sooner."

"Let's hope it's not sooner," Remus responded.

Harry nodded, lingering for just another moment before leading Ginny to the trap door and back to Hogwarts.

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Despite the late hour at which they had returned, Harry actually slept well that night and woke feeling refreshed and rested – which meant he was back on his normal training schedule. After giving the matter some thought, Harry altered his regimen slightly due to his experiences in St. Mungo's. He no longer spent all of his time duelling in wide open spaces; instead, he opted to vary the environment. Sometimes it was a confined hallway. Other times there were odd corners or various objects that could be used for cover.

During their weekly lesson, Harry told Dumbledore about Voldemort's suspicions. He not only warned the Headmaster of Voldemort's thoughts on Snape but also pointed out that Voldemort would likely know the spy was Harry if he was able to spy on Harry the way Harry was able to spy on him. Dumbledore had only nodded and warned Harry not to become too complacent as things were often not exactly as they appeared to be. Harry could hardly deny the man's words, though he would have liked more of a response than that.

The only other anomaly to Harry's week was an abnormal lack of visions. His scar had prickled a few times here and there, but Voldemort seemed to be lying low for the time being. Harry's sleep was still troubled at times, but he was able to catch up on a whole lot of rest in that time and was feeling great by the weekend. The spare moments he was able to share with Ginny were a lot more lively than they had been over the past couple weeks, leaving both of them in high spirits.

Sunday morning brought with it his double BHA class. When it came time to separate his seven advanced members, he was struck by a

sudden inspiration. He spoke briefly with those seven before whistling and calling the attention of the rest of the class. When they had all quieted down and turned their attentions to him, Harry silently cast Sonorous on his throat and began speaking.

“Thank you. You all have no doubt noticed the duels being performed by your seven classmates here,” Harry gestured to his students behind him. “Today, for a bit of fun, I thought you might all enjoy watching the seven of them team up to duel against me.”

The students all looked at each other, the silence lingering for just a moment before they all began chattering excitedly. Harry smiled and turned to look at his soon-to-be opponents behind him. They offered him nervous smiles, clearly not all too confident of the impending duel even with their numbers.

Turning back to the rest of his students, Harry held up his hands for silence. It took only a short moment until all attention was once again fixed on Harry. “You will find seating behind you. I will have to ask that none of you attempt to enter into the field of battle, which you will see marked clearly in front of you. You will be protected from any stray spells in your seats.”

Turning around, the students were all surprised to see the bleacher-like seats that had materialised while their backs were turned. As they all began shuffling towards the seats, Harry turned around and addressed the combatants. “Nothing more powerful than a Stunner, and no reviving. Beyond that, anything goes. You’ll have several places for cover. Your primary goal is to survive to the end of the battle. If you manage to defeat me, all the better. Understood?” Seven heads nodded simultaneously. “Good.” Harry offered them a warm smile. “Don’t hold anything back. I’d like to see for myself how far you’ve come along.”

He was not disappointed. By the time the battlefield was set up and the contest began, they had about twenty minutes left until the end of class. He set up a timer that would sound when only ten minutes remained and again at the end of the battle. As he had promised, Harry provided them with a few places for cover from which to work. For his part, he gave himself just one piece of wall on the other side

of the battlefield. He expected the seven to remain where they were as their primary goal was only to survive, so he would be on the offensive and would need to leave his own defensive position.

Harry stripped out of his robe for the battle, wearing only a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Sitting on a waist high stone wall facing away from his opponents, Harry called out. "Are you ready?"

The answering call of "Ready" sounded through the hall.

Harry stood and turned around. "Begin!" he shouted. He was pleased to see that they wasted no time peeking out from their hiding places and beginning to fire on his unprotected form. He ducked behind the wall to observe them for a moment. He was able to locate five of them. The other two appeared to be keeping their positions hidden. He smiled, pleased with the strategy, simple as it was. It showed that they were not taking anything for granted.

Wanting to test them further, he leapt over the wall out into the open. Rather than charging forward, he allowed them to fire at him from a distance while he both dodged and shielded himself from their attacks. Their aims had improved, and they seemed to work together to try to keep him from moving around too much.

Contain the enemy. Good. But how would they respond to something a little more unexpected? With no warning, Harry turned to the offensive. He began pushing forward, firing spells at his attackers, forcing them to duck into hiding or cast shields for protection. He concentrated on his foes and noticed how a few of them, after ducking out of sight, always reappeared in the same position. He used that to his advantage, timing his curses such that he was firing when their heads were down rather than vice versa. After just a couple minutes, two of their numbers had fallen.

One of them, he thought it was Ryan, realised his strategy and shouted to his allies. "Move around more. He's memorising our positions hoping to get us when we reappear."

Harry knew he liked that Slytherin. He was clever and always seemed to keep a cool head. With only three attackers now firing at him, Harry

was able to push farther forward. He was wary of getting too close without knowing where his other two opponents were. One of the two he had downed was hiding behind the short wall closest to him. If he could take that cover, it would make his work much easier, but he expected at least one if not both of the remaining two attackers to be waiting on the other side to ambush him when he approached.

The timer sounded for the first time, alerting Harry that he had only ten more minutes to subdue the others. Time to make things interesting. He set off in a dead sprint for the closest wall. Rather than use it as a cover, he leapt up, kicking off the wall and spinning around in the air. Sure enough, both of the missing attackers were waiting there caught completely by surprise by his sudden appearance. Both were Stunned before his feet touched the ground.

He dove out of the way of a couple curses sent by the remaining three students. He quickly ducked back behind the wall he had just leapt over to give himself a moment to catch his breath and formulate a plan. Two of the remaining three were close together while the third was quite alone. It would be much easier to take out the one and then deal with the two, but the solitary student was farthest away.

Without being able to hold up a shield wandlessly, Harry had to be much more careful in how he moved with the close ranges they were now fighting at. They were becoming far too adept at hitting a moving target. Wary of the ticking clock, Harry popped out the side of the wall and began making his way to the solitary student. The other two students seemed to recognise his plan right away and did their best to prevent him from moving towards their comrade.

Meanwhile, Ryan, Harry's mark, seemed also to realise his precarious position. He unexpectedly left his cover, diving behind another wall closer to the other two, just narrowly escaping two Stunners Harry had hastily sent his way. Ryan had not quite joined the others, but he was no longer truly isolated from them either. This would make things much more interesting.

Harry was unfortunately left quite exposed by the unanticipated change of position as Ryan was now in a much better position to join the attacks of the two others. Undeterred, Harry attempted to flank

Ryan, placing the boy between himself and his other two opponents. Again, Ryan was ready for the move and fell back to join the other two. Harry knew time was a major issue now that he had wasted so much in his failed attempt to isolate Ryan. If he hoped to defeat them before time ran out, he would have to forgo strategy and launch an all-out offensive.

That's just what he did. Weaving in and out of spells, Harry allowed his instincts to take over, the months of training having taught his body to move and to avoid spells without conscious thought. Meanwhile, his wand was trained on his attackers, throwing hexes and curses at a furious rate, interrupting their attacks as they attempted to avoid and shield themselves from his spells. He shifted all his focus to Ryan, launching spell after spell at him. He lasted nearly a minute under the onslaught before he fell. Harry set his sights on the others: Nick and Mary-Jo.

Focusing first on Nick, Harry began anew his attack. He managed to trip him up and just as his Stunner was about to hit its mark, Mary-Jo leapt in its path with a shouted, "Protego!"

Harry was caught off guard by the action giving Nick enough time to recover himself and rejoin the battle. Mary-Jo began falling back, and Nick seemed to follow her lead. Harry followed, never breaking from his relentless attack. Limited by the rules of engagement, Harry had no choice but to stick with the low-powered hexes and curses as he pursued them in a game of cat and mouse. The match lasted only another minute or two before the timer sounded announcing the end of the duel.

The crowd of watching students, about whom Harry had completely forgotten, burst out into applause. Harry could not suppress a smile as he bent over with his hands on his slightly bent knees to catch his breath and rest a moment. That was fun!

More than that, he was incredibly proud of his students. He looked over at his two survivors to find them speaking quietly to each other, shy smiles on both their faces. He smiled and turned away for a minute to give them a moment of semi-privacy, choosing instead to revive the others.

After a couple minutes and five silent Reennervate spells, his five fallen students were all brought back to consciousness. As they rejoined Nick and Mary-Jo, he asked them all to wait while he dismissed the rest of the class. They chatted excitedly as they began to shuffle towards the door, some stopping to talk to their seven classmates involved in the duel. Harry was happy to see them all smile and laugh with their peers, no barriers between them.

After several minutes, the room had finally cleared out, leaving Harry alone with his seven students. "Let me start by saying how proud I am. You've all come a long way in a short amount of time. Your aim, even at a distance, was great. You took things seriously, devising a strategy to defeat me."

"Too bad it didn't work," Jennifer called out.

Harry smiled. "Yes, shame, that." He did not even attempt to hide his smile. "Nevertheless, you forced me into taking a great risk. It ended up working well for me, but if I had guessed your position incorrectly, I'd have been in trouble." He began pacing back and forth in front of them as he continued, "One thing you need to account for in devising strategies is that sometimes the most logical course of action is not the best. As in this case, the most logical place for you to hide was at the wall closest to me, where the others could easily signal you of my approach. I was able to discern that as well as you were, which is why I rushed the wall so as not to give you the time to react to my presence."

He paused a moment in both his pacing and his speech, giving them a moment to digest his words. After a moment Sarah met his eyes and spoke up, "You mean that sometimes the best thing you can do is something illogical so as to catch the enemy off guard?"

Harry chuckled. "Something like that. You don't necessarily want to do something illogical; just avoid doing anything obvious – something your opponent is likely to expect." They nodded their heads at his words, and Harry was satisfied they had gotten the message. "Beyond that, Ryan already picked out your only other major flaw – predictability. When ducking behind cover, it's best to keep your

opponents guessing where you are; otherwise you give them the opportunity to anticipate when and where you'll reappear."

Dropping his professorial role for a moment, Harry smiled widely at them all as he stated, "I don't know about you guys, but I really enjoyed that." They laughed at his candid statement until he spoke again. "I think we'll have to do this more often." The laughter paused a moment as they all looked at each other for a moment until they all, Harry included, burst out laughing again. "Go on," Harry stated a moment later. "I don't want to make you miss lunch."

"You mean you don't want to miss lunch?" Ryan retorted.

Harry shrugged and with a smile responded, "Same difference."

He walked out of the room with them, heading up to Gryffindor tower with Nick as the others all retreated to their own common rooms. After lunch, Harry reflected on the earlier lesson. It was clear to him that he had made the right decision in choosing to separate those seven students and set them duelling each other. It also made him see that he needed to implement a similar scheme into his IHA classes sooner rather than later. There were only a few months left in the school year, and he would need as much time as possible to prepare them before the summer holidays when they would leave the safety of the school. He resolved to sit down sometime that week to work out the logistics of how to implement that into his IHA classes on such a wide scale.

OoOoO

Harry's luck ran out the following week as his visions returned, though with less frequency than in previous weeks. Tuesday night he witnessed an attack on a Muggle town. It was becoming almost mechanical for him to shut down his emotions whenever a vision took him. It was necessary to do so to avoid Voldemort's notice, yet he was almost sick with himself upon waking up for not being horrified at what he had seen. Even as he was sorting through the memory, the emotional impact was far more stunted than it should have been.

Friday night, though, Harry had a vision of an entirely different nature. Voldemort was alone. He was anxious, waiting for somebody – who it was eluded Harry. Voldemort's thoughts were too scattered for Harry to make much sense of them. After a minute of waiting, Harry was almost positive his anticipation involved weeding out the spy in his ranks.

He could hear the footsteps approaching long before the cloaked figure appeared before his eyes. "You have kept me waiting, Severus," Voldemort hissed.

"I'm sorry, My Lord," Snape replied as he bowed down on one knee. "It was difficult to get out of the castle, but I came as quickly as I could."

"Have you brought what I asked for?" Voldemort impatiently inquired.

"Of course, My Lord," Snape uttered, reaching into his robes and pulling out a potion that Harry did not recognise.

"Yes," Voldemort hissed quietly. "This will do just fine. You serve your master well, Severus."

Snape said nothing, only bowing his head.

"I think I shall allow you to accompany me," Voldemort continued, "to watch as my planning and your hard work both come to fruition." His thoughts were too guarded for Harry to read Voldemort's intentions. Harry was almost positive that he was testing Snape in some way, but in what way, Harry did not know.

"My Lord?"

"Come Severus, you've left us very little time," Voldemort commanded.

Harry felt himself fading away, but for once he did not want to retreat to his own body just yet. He needed to ascertain Voldemort's true aim,

but there was little he could do without alerting Voldemort to his presence.

Harry awoke with a start, brushing aside his curtains and leaping from his bed. He was throwing on a robe when a voice startled him, "Everything all right, mate?"

Harry pulled the robe down to uncover his face and looked at Ron, who was sitting up in his bed watching worriedly. "Yeah. I think Snape's in trouble."

"Bugger it," Ron responded. "He deserves whatever..." A yawn interrupted him, giving Harry the opportunity to butt in.

"It'll be all right; I just want to warn Dumbledore," Harry said. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Suit yourself," Ron said, lying back down in bed.

Harry rushed as quickly as he could to Dumbledore's office, flinging open his door to find the office empty. Momentarily caught off guard, he hesitated in the middle of the room as he tried to figure out what to do next. A trill from Fawkes diverted his attention. He looked over at the phoenix, who met Harry's eye for a moment, then looked deliberately over his shoulder.

Harry turned on the spot to face the fireplace. "He left in the fireplace?" Harry asked and then spun around. "Did he go to Headquarters?"

Fawkes gave another trill that Harry understood as an affirmative. "Thank you," Harry said. Turning back to the fireplace, he grabbed a pinch of Floo powder and threw it into the fire. Stepping into the rising green flames, Harry spoke, "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place."

A short, nauseating journey later, Harry spilled out of the fireplace in his godfather's old house. A few muttered and shouted curses met Harry's ears as well as the scraping of chairs. He raised onto his hands and knees to find a table full of Order members looking down

at him in shock. Feeling entirely out of place, he muttered, "Erm – hello."

Several people spoke at once so that Harry was unable to understand any of them. He picked himself up off the ground as Dumbledore called everyone to order. When the room had quieted, Dumbledore turned to Harry and asked, "To what do we owe this most unexpected visit?"

"It's Snape, sir," Harry replied.

"Professor Snape, Harry," the man corrected absently.

"Right, him," Harry stated, hardly caring about semantics at the moment. "I think he's in trouble."

"And what has led you to this conclusion?" Dumbledore asked calmly.

Harry was suddenly wary of speaking in front of the assembled Order. His eyes raked to the side, covering nearly the whole length of the table before snapping back to Dumbledore. His Headmaster nodded encouragingly, and Harry understood. His visions were Order business. "I had a vision. Sn – Professor Snape brought some sort of potion to Voldemort, and Voldemort said he would reward Snape by allowing him to watch something with him. He never said what, exactly."

Harry paused half a moment anticipating an interruption, but nothing came. "The thing is, Voldemort was very anxious about something, and I know he's been trying to ferret out a spy in the Death Eaters. I think that whatever they are doing tonight that it's some sort of test of Snape's loyalty. That's why Voldemort wanted Snape with him, so Snape would be there when Voldemort learned whether or not he is the spy."

Silence met his statement. Dumbledore stroked from his chin down his beard from his place at the head of the table.

“How do you know that You-Know-Who is testing Snape tonight?” a voice challenged.

Harry turned to locate the source of the voice. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt. “I can sort of read some of his thoughts. They weren’t very clear, but I’d bet anything that whatever is going on tonight, it could mean Snape’s life if things go wrong.”

“That is troubling news, indeed,” Dumbledore said. “You feel strongly then, Harry, that this is the case?”

“Yes,” Harry replied without hesitation. He knew deep in his gut that Snape’s fate lay in the balance. Whether or not it was worth whatever sacrifice they might need to make in order to spare his life, Harry could not say.

“Thank you, Harry. You have left a very difficult decision at our feet, but I fear for what would have happened had we been unaware of the full circumstances.”

“Erm – you’re welcome,” Harry stated, once again uncomfortable with nearly every eye at the table glued to his standing form. He found it hard to mask his annoyance at the indirect brush off. He provided them with a valuable piece of information, and they pushed him right back out the door so the adults could discuss it. Harry swallowed his displeasure and did his best to adopt a neutral countenance. “I guess I’ll return to Hogwarts then?” he half asked, half stated.

“Yes, I believe that would be best,” Dumbledore replied. “Thank you, again, Harry.”

Harry nodded, gave a little wave to the table full of people, and turned around to face the fireplace, dropping his mask and allowing his displeasure to show. A short Floo ride later, he was once again standing in the Headmaster’s office with just Fawkes for company. Not in a huge hurry to get back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry walked over to Fawkes’ perch and began to stroke his feathers. Finding the action soothing, Harry felt his annoyance wash away.

“It seems I’ve been making a habit of appearing here at all hours of the night,” Harry stated to the phoenix. Fawkes let out a short trill as he leaned into Harry’s hand, encouraging his ministrations. “I suppose you don’t get a lot of company up here, except for Dumbledore and the other professors. And somehow I don’t imagine they pay you all that much attention.”

Another trill sounded, and Harry knew that he was correct. In fact, he got the vague feeling that Fawkes was thinking of both him and Dumbledore rather fondly, as if he considered the both of them friends.

Harry was warmed by the sentiment passed from the phoenix. He looked into Fawkes’ eyes and was reminded of something Dumbledore once told him. A thought had long been niggling in the back of Harry’s mind, and he did not think he would ever get a more opportune moment to voice it. “Do you think it’s right of me to hide so much from everybody – Dumbledore, my friends? Am I being too hard on them, not even giving them a chance?”

Fawkes opened his beak yet again. A short, sorrowful song rent the air, leaving Harry stunned in its wake. It conveyed loneliness and regret, but another song followed, lifting Harry’s spirits. This song spoke of strength and conviction – maturity and wisdom. There was a slight warble in it, telling of the hard times, fights with friends and loved ones – feelings of betrayal - but the song rose back up again. Reconciliation – a reunion.

It was an odd feeling, listening to Fawkes sing. Every little nuance to the pitch evoked a different emotion, telling Harry something new and different. The song filled him with hope, but it also gave him pause. He needed more time to think on it. There was something there, hanging on the edge of his consciousness but just out of reach.

With one last stroke of the phoenix’s feathers, Harry bid Fawkes a good night, thanking him for his counsel. The walk back to Gryffindor Tower felt long and tiring. He was eager, as he climbed up to his dormitory, to crawl back into bed and sleep.

Chapter 22: Driven to Distraction

It was a dangerous game, playing double agent between two of the most powerful wizards in the world. Severus took great pride in his ability to hold the confidences of both the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore was, by nature, a trusting person. He wanted to believe in people, but, make no mistake, he was not a man easily fooled. He could sense deception in even the most skilled Occlumens, of which Snape could count himself. For Severus, who had taken the Dark Mark, Dumbledore's trust was not easily earned, but once he had garnered the man's trust, he had little fear of losing it.

The Dark Lord, on the other hand, was another matter entirely. Every encounter with the shade of a man was a test of his cunning. All it would take was one false move, one seed of doubt to be implanted in the Dark Lord's mind, and all would be lost. Severus knew the stakes of the game: one false move and his life would be forfeit – if he was lucky, immediately.

Severus was fairly certain he had just lost this game.

With both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord thinking him their own double agent, he was naturally expected to provide certain details to each side. He would not hold the confidence of either if he was not forthcoming with at least some helpful news. It was always a dangerous proposition, however, choosing which details to disclose and which to keep to himself. It was here, he now knew, that he had made the critical mistake.

The Dark Lord was always wary of risking his presence in any of the Death Eater raids. If Severus was to keep up appearances as the double agent, it would not do for anyone to recognise him – especially one in the Ministry. Imagine Severus' surprise when the Dark Lord insisted on his presence this night, when they were to raid the home of the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour.

He had spent the last month slaving in his Potions laboratory, creating a type of poison that attacked the mind of the drinker, weakening its natural defences. In particular, the potion made the drinker much more susceptible to the Imperius Curse. Snape had

deduced, based upon his need to create the potion, that the Dark Lord had no intention of participating in this particular operation. If there was one weakness to be found in the Dark Lord, it was arrogance. He often overlooked possible obstacles, thinking himself far too powerful to be affected by such trivialities. So the fact that the Dark Lord had ordered Severus to prepare this potion told him that he expected one of his Death Eaters to cast the Imperius Curse on Scrimgeour.

It would appear, at least by his own logic, that he had been set up. Dumbledore had been wary of acting on any new information right now due to Potter's warning, but Severus had been unconcerned. He refused to believe that Potter was somehow able to glean some insight from the Dark Lord that Severus had missed. If the Dark Lord suspected him of treachery, Severus was certain he would know it. Scrimgeour was too important to risk on the unfounded fears of a spoiled brat. It would appear that Potter's luck was limitless.

As they approached Scrimgeour's dwelling, Voldemort hardly needed to pause as he deconstructed the wards. It was pathetic to think that this was the best the Ministry could offer. They moved quickly, though one could sense no hurry in the Dark Lord's movements. He all but glided as Snape took long strides at his side.

Under different circumstances, it would have been considered a great honour to have been hand selected by the Dark Lord to accompany him – especially being the only one. Instead, Severus was ready and waiting to fend for his life from his Master. He did not imagine himself skilled enough to escape the Dark Lord's grasp, but if he was able to put up enough of a fight, perhaps his death would be swift on the field of battle rather than drawn out through endless torture.

He held no fear of death. He had danced around the spectre long enough that it held no sway over his emotions. In fact, if there was any emotion he could be said to be feeling right now, it would be relief. As much as he prided himself on the way he played this game, he was tired of playing. He supposed that was one way he could be considered the Dark Lord's superior, for death was the only fear the Dark Lord knew.

As they approached the front entrance, the Dark Lord lifted a hand, and the doors crashed open. A patter of footsteps provided a precursor to Scrimgeour's arrival, his wand already drawn as he rounded a corner and looked to their position. His eyes widened as he realised who was intruding upon his home, but, to the man's credit, he did not flee. Instead, he assumed a duelling stance and prepared to fend off their attacks.

The Dark Lord laughed, and, as Severus drew his wand, he wondered what the hell had happened to the Order.

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall's voice rang out above the bustle as the students all packed up at the end of class. "Might I have a quick word with you?"

Harry smiled at his friends. "I'll see you guys later." He stepped to the side as they all passed by, rolling his eyes at Ron's sympathetic glance and Hermione's inquisitive one. He remained behind his desk until the rows in front of him had all cleared out. When the door closed behind the last of his classmates, Harry approached the professor's desk.

"How are you feeling, Harry?" she asked warmly.

"Fine, thanks," Harry responded automatically. A moment later he realised the reason for her question and added, "I haven't had many visions lately, so I've been sleeping fairly well."

"That's good," she said with a smile. "I must confess that it concerned me when you stumbled into Headquarters in the middle of our Order meeting a couple nights back. I feared you might still be experiencing your visions on a frequent basis."

"I tend to get them whenever Voldemort is feeling any strong emotions. It happens a lot when he's involved in an attack," Harry explained. "He enjoys them a lot." After a momentary pause, he continued, "But ever since he began worrying about a possible spy, he's been participating less."

“That must come as a relief to you,” she commented.

“Yes, very much so,” Harry replied. A short silence followed his statement prompting Harry to ask, “Is that all you wanted to talk to me about?”

She shook her head. “No, I wished to inform you of my intent to visit your classes this Sunday and wondered if you might have time for a short meeting after the latter lesson.”

“Ah, yes, that would be fine,” Harry stated. “Actually, that might work out well.” At her curious glance, Harry explained, “I’ve been making plans to restructure my Intermediate class to focus more heavily on combat situations. I was a little worried about how it would work, but if you’ll be there I think that will help things run more smoothly.”

“What are your plans?” Minerva asked curiously.

“Well, here’s what I was thinking…”

His discussion with Minerva ended up lasting all the way to the beginning of lunch. By the time he arrived, the meal was already being served. Ron, even, was finishing off his first plate and reaching for seconds.

Harry gave a tiny wave to Ginny who was sitting with her friends before settling in beside Neville and across from Hermione. “Hey guys,” he greeted warmly as he began reaching for a plate of sandwiches.

“Hey Harry,” Neville returned.

Ron gave an indecipherable, food-muffled reply, earning himself a short, reproachful stare from Hermione, who then turned to Harry and said, “Hello Harry. What did Professor McGonagall want to see you about?”

Harry stopped himself from rolling his eyes at his friend’s predictable inquisitiveness. “My HA classes. She’ll be observing again this weekend.”

“What does she think of the classes?” Hermione asked. She watched Harry intently having seemingly forgotten about the food still lingering on her plate.

“I dunno. I think she’s pretty pleased overall,” Harry answered with a shrug. “She hasn’t told me to change anything at least. She’s offered suggestions and the like, and today she helped me with some plans I’ve been making.”

“What plans?” Neville piped in.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Harry smilingly evaded the inquiry, digging into his lunch.

As he chewed on his food, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and the strange feeling that he was being watched. He glanced up at the Head Table and confirmed that Snape seemed to be doing his best to bore two holes into him with his eyes. It had been like this ever since the night Harry had interrupted the Order meeting. Harry shook his head and resumed eating. Whatever was wrong with Snape, the man did not look at all pleased, but as there was nothing Harry could do about it, he just did his best to put it out of his mind.

When the time came, Harry, Ron, and Neville all left the Great Hall together, heading out through the entrance hall and into the grounds down to Hagrid’s hut. Harry did not know whether to dread the class or look forward to it. The griffin was nothing if not interesting, but Harry did not know how to continue his attempts to make peace with the beast. Any advances he made were met with aggression, so how could he convince the creature that he meant well?

The answer was not easily forthcoming. He resolved to do a little research on the subject. There were records of wizards who had managed to befriend griffins, so it had to be possible. Perhaps their records would lend him some insight into how to win over the creature. In any case, he gave the griffin a perfunctory mental greeting, which again met with hostility. Deciding to wait until he had done some research, he refrained from further attempts.

After the class, Ron and Neville both left for their next classes leaving Harry the opportunity to head to the Room of Requirement unhindered. He spent a good amount of his time duelling training dummies in a hallway, testing out different strategies for the enclosed battlefield. He realised that his oil trick from St. Mungo's would have worked much better had he sent an Incendio directly after, but he doubted he would be able to stomach the effects. It was one thing to watch several lifeless dummies burn to ashes; it would be another thing to inflict the same fate upon a living human – even a Death Eater.

He knew he would eventually need to take at least one life in the war, but he was leery of turning to outright lethal warfare. Naïve as it may be, Harry had no desire to take even the life of a Death Eater. Abstractly, he recognised that it was likely that, in the course of the war, he would probably claim more than one life, but even with that knowledge, he was in no hurry to land that first killing blow. There was also a difference between killing someone and torturing them. Attempting to burn someone alive seemed a bit extreme. Nevertheless, he could not deny the effectiveness of such an approach.

Beyond that, he found Blasting Curses aimed at the walls or ceiling proved to be quite effective in doing some decent damage while also distracting his opponents. He also began to play with different transfigurations and animations – inspiration coming to him from the duel he witnessed between Dumbledore and Voldemort in the Ministry of Magic. He lacked the control of Dumbledore who had managed to animate several statues at once, and they all seemed to do his will without taking any concentration on his part. Harry, using all of his focus, struggled to maintain just a couple at one time. It was something he intended to practice.

Harry was spared another vision that night, though his scar was prickling slightly that morning. He sensed that Voldemort was frustrated. Harry thought it might have something to do with the spy, but that was based solely on his own speculation. After all, Snape was still very much alive, for whatever that was worth. Harry had Potions that day just before lunch, and he was not looking forward to

the class. Whatever Snape wanted with Harry, it was obviously not of good intent. The class was likely to be torture.

He had no idea how right he was. Snape forgot even to insult the rest of the non-Slytherins in the class. Instead, all of his loathing was focused squarely on Harry. It was unnerving, working through the class with Snape's malevolent gaze fixed firmly on him. The other students seemed to notice this as well, and several gave him either questioning or sympathetic looks. Hermione was one of the former, though she did not dare ask him about it with Snape's attention so firmly fixed in his direction.

Finally, unable to focus, Harry looked up and squarely met the man's gaze. A split second later, he felt something crash against his mind. Harry staggered backwards a step. While he kept his mind defended constantly, the attack came unexpectedly, and his barriers barely held. He quickly reinforced his defences, pouring all his concentration and will into the process.

"Harry, are you all right?" Hermione whispered at his side.

"Fine," he managed to respond even as Snape launched another attack, but, prepared as he was, Harry's barriers held strong against the onslaught. Inside, Harry's mind was spinning, wondering what had caused the man to lose it like this. The answer was obvious, but it still made little sense.

Whatever it was that happened with Voldemort and Snape over the weekend, it must have shaken the Potions master. Harry had no idea what it was that Voldemort was after or what happened after his vision that night, but clearly Snape was unhappy with Harry for something. Was he wrong about Voldemort? Was Snape angry that Harry had warned the Order against interfering when he was actually in no danger at all? Harry intended to find out.

He needed only wait another second before Snape once again threw himself against Harry's mental shields. As he withdrew for another assault, however, Harry struck. He had learned in his studies that a person's Occlumency defences were weakened while performing

Legilimency. Based on the force with which Snape was attempting to break into his mind, Harry suspected he might just be able to break through his defences.

He was right.

Snape's shields were still strong, but thanks to all the practice he had put in with Ginny, Harry broke through before Snape managed to recover. Unfortunately, that was only the easy part. Not wanting to intrude upon Ginny's privacy, Harry had no experience searching for memories inside a person's mind. He was bombarded by numerous flashes of seemingly random memories. They were flying by so quickly that Harry could hardly comprehend any of it, but when he noticed Voldemort in one of them, he latched onto it and followed it.

Before he could get far, he felt Snape's mind fight against him. Harry knew that it was a losing battle. His Legilimency skills were young and undeveloped while Snape had been practicing Occlumency for longer than Harry had been alive. Harry retreated back into his own mind, hastily reinforcing his mental barriers in case Snape tried to counter. Harry focused his eyes on the man and found him, unsurprisingly, steaming with rage.

"Out!" Snape bellowed, his voice shocking the rest of the students who were all unaware of the battle that had just been waged. Harry did not need to be told that Snape was referring to him. He quickly packed up his things and left the room, avoiding all the eyes staring at him in confusion, particularly Hermione's.

As he exited the classroom, Harry wondered if the man intended to follow him out. His answer came in the form of a slamming door. Relishing his luck at having avoided another confrontation with Snape, Harry slowly trudged his way up to his office. He was supposed to meet Ginny there after class for Occlumency lessons and thought it best to use the extra time he had to calm his roiling emotions.

It took a while for his racing mind to calm down; he still could not believe that Snape had attacked him outright like that. He wanted more than anything to know what happened that night. The fact that he was so intimately involved yet still kept out of the loop did nothing

to ease Harry's frustration with his headmaster. The least Dumbledore could have done would have been to let Harry know what was going on. Instead, Harry could only hope that Remus would be able to fill in the gaps for him as Harry did not see how he would get answers any other way. The full moon was approaching, luckily, but, for Harry, it could not come soon enough.

When Ginny entered the room, she seemed to immediately notice his preoccupation. "What's wrong?" she asked, frowning as she seated herself in the armchair opposite him.

"Where do I begin?" Harry asked and then launched into an explanation of the course of events that had led to his early dismissal from Potions.

Ginny was appropriately outraged to hear that Snape had attempted to break into his mind. It was only after Harry assured her that he would take the matter up with Dumbledore that Ginny finally let the matter drop. With that out of the way, they turned to the business at hand.

Ginny had come a long way in her Occlumency skills. As it was, Harry had been unable to break into her mind over their last few lessons. He was not sure if his own Legilimency skills were deficient or if her Occlumency skills had just become that good. If nothing else, his success in breaking into Snape's mind made him suspect it was the latter. In the beginning they had been progressing at a more or less even pace, but after a certain point, Ginny began to outstrip him.

If all went according to plan, that was about to change. Thus far their lessons had been strictly about Occlumency without any distractions, but Harry had something else in mind that day. As he worked around her barriers looking for a weak point, Harry momentarily flicked his gaze down to Ginny's lips. "You know you have a freckle right above your upper lip," he commented. "It's sitting there all alone, and every time I see it, I can hardly resist the urge to kiss it."

That did it. He felt as her concentration lapsed, and he took advantage by breaking through her practically non-existent shields. When, a moment later, he extricated himself from her mind, he found

Ginny's irritated face staring back at him. "That was some dirty trick," she declared righteously. "What was that about?"

"You need to learn to maintain your concentration in the face of distractions. Do you expect Voldemort or any other Death Eater to allow you to just sit back and relax while you attempt to reinforce your mental barriers?" Harry asked.

"No, but I don't expect them to be talking about kissing me either," Ginny grumbled, though her anger had deflated. After a moment she sighed and met his eyes. "I hadn't really thought about that," she admitted softly.

Harry smiled in comfort. "Neither had I until Dumbledore used the same dirty trick on me."

"He told you he wanted to kiss one of your freckles?" Ginny asked, laughing at her own joke.

"Har har," Harry replied. "Very funny." He rolled his eyes dramatically but smiled at her all the same. "Since you seem to be getting along just fine without any distractions, I thought it was time to shake things up a bit."

"And you never saw fit to tell me this beforehand?" she challenged.

"What would be the fun in that?" Harry asked. When she stuck her tongue out at him in reply, he continued, "Now that – there's a lot of fun to be had with that."

She blushed slightly as her tongue retreated back into her mouth, and Harry chuckled lightly. "You're cute when you blush," he told her. "When we first started dating you used to blush more, but you don't very much any more."

Ginny shrugged. "I'm more comfortable with you – with us – now. There's not as much to blush about."

Harry nodded. "I know. I guess it just means I'll have to get more creative."

She smiled widely in reply. "I guess so."

When they eventually got back to work, Harry was able to distract Ginny several more times through various means. Harry could tell Ginny was slightly frustrated about it, but she took it with grace – or perhaps she was just enjoying some of those distractions too much to be upset about them. It was difficult to tell.

During Wednesday's IHA meeting, Harry surreptitiously asked four of his students to remain behind after class. Each gave him an inquisitive glance but nodded in acquiescence when Harry was not forthcoming with any details. At the end of class, his four handpicked students remained behind, but Harry held his tongue until the door shut behind the last of his students.

Focusing his gaze on the four students, Harry could see the curiosity blazing in all of their eyes. "By now I'm sure you're all wondering why I asked you to meet with me." It was not a question, but four heads nodded in answer. "Well, I need your help."

"What kind of help?" Blaise asked as Cho responded, "Whatever you need, Harry."

"I appreciate that, Cho, but you may want to take a page from Blaise and hear what I'm asking first," Harry smilingly replied. "The short explanation is that I would like your help teaching the class."

"Why would you need our help?" Neville asked in bewilderment.

"Yeah, Harry, you do an amazing job already," Susan added. "I don't see why you would need us."

Harry did his best to force back the heat that seemed determined to rush into his cheeks as he responded, "Thank you. But the reason I am asking for your help is because I plan on focusing a lot more heavily on life-like duelling situations. To do this, I'm going to split the

class into groups. While two groups are fighting each other, the rest of the class will still be doing spellwork. So while I supervise the duels, I would like you to be in charge of the rest of the class.”

There was a short pause following Harry’s explanation, but the silence was only short-lived as Blaise burst out, “You mean we don’t get to fight in the duels?”

“Huh?” Harry asked in confusion before he realised what he had left out. “No. I mean, yes, you will still be involved in the duels. I will just arrange the groups so that at least two of you are always free to take over the teaching responsibilities at any given time.”

“Oh, well that’s all right then,” Blaise replied.

Harry smiled and glanced from one student to the next. “So what do you all think? Do you have any questions?”

Neville opened and closed his mouth once before giving voice to his question. “Why pick us?”

Harry furrowed his brow as he replied, “I thought that would be obvious. Professor McGonagall thought it would be best to pick one member from each house so that no one would feel I was playing favourites, so I chose who I thought would be best suited for the job from each house.”

Harry could tell from the look on Neville’s face that he had not managed to answer his friend’s question. “But...why...?” Neville drifted off, seemingly unsure of how to put his query into words.

“I think what he’s trying to ask is why you didn’t pick Granger,” Blaise inserted, turning to Neville for confirmation. Harry did likewise, and Neville nodded.

“Oh,” Harry said, a bit flustered. “Well, Hermione is bright, of course. There’s no disputing that, but I’ve seen the both of you working with other struggling students. People respond much better to you than Hermione.”

Neville's eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "Oh," he stated a bit uncomfortably, and Harry could just see the start of a blush to form on his cheeks. "All right then."

"Any other questions?" Harry asked.

Cho took a slight step forward as she asked, "Will we be learning the lessons early so that we can teach them properly?"

"Good question," Harry stated. "We'll be doing this every Sunday, and the first half hour of class will be spent as normal. After that we'll begin splitting up, and each pair of groups will have about half an hour for the mock battles." Harry's eyes briefly flicked across each of their faces to make sure they were all following. "This upcoming Sunday will just be review to give everyone a chance to get settled into the new routine. After that, if you guys want to come in early, you're more than welcome. I'm always in here well before the start of class. But I think the initial half hour will most likely be enough for you all to get a decent grasp of the material."

"Anything else?" he asked. The four all looked at each other for a long moment before they each turned and shook their heads. "So, what do you say? Are you willing to help?"

All four gave their agreement. "Great," Harry replied with some relief. "And thank you. It would probably be best if you all came in a little early on Sunday, just to go over any last minute details or any questions that might arise." With that settled, Harry sent them all on their way, walking with Neville back to Gryffindor Tower where he spent his evening reading.

The following evening held another of his Occlumency lessons with Dumbledore. Harry had become rather adept at splitting his concentration to stop the man's dual attacks. Occasionally, Dumbledore was still able to slip through Harry's defences, but it was a rare occurrence and usually coincided with a lapse in concentration on Harry's part. They had begun doing different things while waging their internal battles. They usually chatted, though they rarely hit on

any topics of import to Harry. Harry was able to maintain his concentration through most of their talks, but every so often the headmaster was able to distract Harry enough to take advantage.

Harry hoped that his progress in splitting his concentration in two to stop the mental assault would lend itself into Legilimency as well. It was only a matter of time before Ginny reached a point where she would be able to block out distractions in order to repel his advances. If he was not mistaken, she was advancing even more quickly than he had, which, according to Dumbledore, was rather remarkable in and of itself.

Keeping his promise to Ginny, Harry steered their conversation onto more serious matters. "Did Professor Snape speak to you about our Potions lesson on Tuesday?" he asked. In truth, he was rather curious to hear the answer to this question. He had been shocked that Snape had not cornered him later that day in an attempt to get him expelled. In fact, Snape seemed to be ignoring Harry entirely at the moment, which suited Harry just fine.

"No, I'm afraid he did not," the headmaster replied with just the slightest hint of unease. "Did something happen that you wish to tell me about?"

Harry hesitated, surprised that the man did not know. Then again, Snape would not have wanted to admit to his own crime, let alone the fact that Harry had got through his mental barriers. "You might say that, I guess," he replied. He ran a hand through his hair as he considered his words. "He tried to break into my mind during class," Harry stated, meeting the man's gaze.

Dumbledore steepled his hands under his chin. "Indeed?" he asked as if Harry had just told him the most innocuous news.

"Yes," Harry replied, annoyed with the man's nonchalant response. "Luckily, my Occlumency shields were more than up to the task."

"I have no doubt that they were," Dumbledore responded, nodding at Harry as if offering him praise.

“It doesn’t bother you that one of your professors attempted to violate my mind?” Harry asked, attempting to match the headmaster’s unflappable tone and expression.

“It certainly does,” Dumbledore admitted.

“And what do you intend to do about it?” Harry prodded.

“Rest assured, I will have a conversation with Severus on the matter,” Dumbledore stated.

Harry had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. He could just imagine the fat lot of good that would do, but, knowing it would no doubt come up in that conversation, Harry felt it would be best if he divulged the other major detail of their encounter. “I broke into Snape’s mind,” he stated in a deadpan.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows momentarily shot up into his hairline before he managed to control his reaction, resuming his look of only mild curiosity. “Oh?”

“Ever since the night I walked in on that Order meeting, he’s been staring at me at meals,” Harry explained. “I can tell he’s not happy with me – not that he ever is. When he tried to break into my mind in class, I guess I let my curiosity get the better of me.”

“I guess that would make two of you,” Dumbledore interjected.

“Yes,” Harry responded. “I guess it would. I wanted to know what happened that night.”

“I once told you, Harry, that your father saved Severus’ life,” Dumbledore stated. “And that was something Severus never forgave him for.” Harry nodded, remembering that conversation. “The other night, you succeeded in doing the same, and I’m afraid Severus was none-too-pleased to learn that he owed another Potter a life-debt.”

Harry shook his head in disgust. There was no love lost between him and Snape, but of all the things to hate him for, the fact that he saved Snape's life was – well it was just as ridiculous as all Snape's other reasons. There was no sense dwelling on it as it was never going to make any sense to him. "So what happened then? I take it the Order decided to take my advice?"

"It was far from a unanimous decision," Dumbledore explained. "Some of the Order was sceptical given past circumstances surrounding your visions."

Harry nodded his head; he had surmised as much from the reactions to his statements during the Order meeting. "I guess that's unavoidable."

"Yes; I'm sure you understand. It was not anything against you. They were merely wary of allowing history to repeat itself."

"Right," Harry said, again resisting the urge to roll his eyes. He was not all that concerned with the Order's opinion of him. As long as they still refused to see him as anything but a child, Harry had no interest in them apart from their involvement with Jim. He felt Dumbledore stab at his mind suddenly and tried to reinforce the area, but his concentration had lapsed too much, and he felt something break through his barrier at another point in his mind. A moment later Harry silently cursed himself. He had forgotten all about the purpose of their meeting.

"Sorry," he said to Dumbledore after a moment. "I got distracted."

The wizened wizard smiled warmly in reply. "No need to apologize, Harry. That is, after all, why we are here."

Harry nodded. He thought about dropping the subject of Snape and the Order, figuring that Dumbledore would just shut him out as he always did, but something spurred him on regardless. Perhaps he just wanted to give the man another chance. "So did Professor Snape say anything about that night?"

“ He made some comments corroborating your suspicions,” Dumbledore answered vaguely.

“What was the trap?” Harry asked. “Was there an attack?”

Dumbledore smiled genially down at Harry as he responded, “I am sorry Harry, but that is burrowing into Order business. Perhaps after you have left Hogwarts we shall talk about inducting you into the Order, but until then, I’m afraid Order business is strictly off limits.”

Harry forced down his irritation knowing it would get him nowhere. He should not have pushed the subject in the first place as he knew exactly where it would lead. He felt the headmaster strike his mental barriers in two places, but this time Harry was prepared for it. His barriers held strong, and he smiled as the headmaster withdrew – only his smile had nothing to do with Occlumency. Harry had other sources now, and he was due to meet with Remus the following evening.

“Excellent,” Dumbledore praised. “You continue to surprise me with your abilities. I suppose that concludes our session for the evening. Keep up with your nightly exercises, and I shall see you in here again next week.”

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Harry replied as humbly as he could manage. “Good evening.” Before leaving, he made a brief stop at Fawkes’ perch to wish the phoenix a good night as well. Fawkes leaned into his touch and sang a soft trill. As Harry met the gaze of the phoenix, he almost turned away, but he could not deny the phoenix. There were times when he just got so frustrated with the headmaster that he just wanted forget the man and give him up as a lost cause. But no matter how frustrating it got, he would not give up on Dumbledore. With a sad smile on his face, Harry held Fawkes’ gaze and mentally whispered, “I promise.” As he gave Fawkes one last scratch, Harry looked up at the Headmaster to see if he had noticed their exchange, but he appeared unconcerned. With that, Harry left the office and retired back to Gryffindor Tower for the evening.

As Harry lay in bed that night, he pondered the promise he had made. He was surprised that Fawkes had asked it of him, but he did not doubt the phoenix's intentions. It was clear that Fawkes wanted what was best for him, and Harry was fairly certain that Fawkes had a much better understanding of what he needed than Harry did himself. It was clear that the phoenix felt Dumbledore would come around eventually. As he drifted off to sleep, Harry could only hope that time would arrive sooner rather than later.

The next day was a rather hectic one for Harry. Not only was he planning on visiting the Shrieking Shack that night, he also had an especially long Quidditch practice that afternoon as their next match was rapidly approaching. The team had really been coming together over the past few weeks, working cohesively and playing better than they ever had prior to the holidays.

Harry had renewed his old routine, lingering in the changing rooms after nearly every practice to talk with Ron. Not only did he feel it was his duty as co-captain, he also enjoyed the chance to spend some time with his long-time friend. With their match just over a week away, Harry could see his friend growing more nervous with each passing day. As soon as their last teammate had left, Ron immediately began talking about different game strategies, tactics and who they needed to look out for on the Ravenclaw team.

After listening to his friend rattle on for a few minutes, Harry finally cut in. "You need to calm down, mate. You'll drive yourself spare at this rate."

Ron looked at him incredulously. "How can you be so calm? The match is a week away. A week away, Harry! We only have a couple more practices to cram everything in. There's not enough time."

"About that," Harry interjected. "I was thinking we should take it easy this week to loosen everyone up for the game."

"Take it easy?" Ron stared at Harry as if seeing him for the very first time. "Take it easy? How can we take it easy for our last week of practices? We'll be totally unprepared come game day."

“We’ve been preparing for the last couple months,” Harry calmly stated. “Exhausting the team now is not going to help matters. It will only wear them out for the game. The best thing we can do now is have some fun, build up their confidence, and make sure the team is well rested for the match.”

“You’re barmy,” Ron muttered barely loudly enough for Harry to hear.

Harry had to hold back his laughter. “Perhaps I am, but trust me on this.”

Ron seemed to struggle with the concept for a long minute before regaining some of his senses. “So what do you think we should do this week?”

“Run through some light drills. Go through our formations and strategies. Just keep the practices light so as not to wear anyone out, and don’t try to push anything new at them. This is the time to perfect what we’re already doing. We’ve already devised our strategies, and we need to stick to them so as not to confuse anybody.”

“Right,” Ron replied. “We can do that.” He hesitated a second. “You’re sure this is a good idea? Light practices and all?”

Harry chuckled. “Trust me.”

“All right, mate.”

It was already rather late by the time he made it back to the common room, so it was not long before it was time to leave. He met Ginny in the tunnel underneath the Whomping Willow where they began their cramped trek to the shack. The walk was made in silence, giving Harry time to think. He had something he needed to talk to Remus about, but he was nervous it might be too soon.

Harry had been thinking a lot lately about his plans for the summer. It was still a few months off, but he knew he had a lot of plans to make

if he intended to fulfill the promise he had made to himself. It would be difficult to find a good place to live while he was stuck at Hogwarts. He had become rather adept at sneaking off, but he needed to be careful about it. Sneaking out during the middle of the day was always a much more difficult prospect than leaving late at night.

He had debated with himself throughout the week whether or not to ask Remus for his help. On the one hand, it would make Harry's life much easier, but Remus had only just learned Harry's secret and may not be all that receptive to the idea. Plus, it would be asking a lot of the man, but Harry knew he would have to tell Remus about his plans sooner or later. It would be rude not to inform him of his plans now that the man was keeping his secrets, and he knew Remus could always say no if it was too much work for him.

He had decided to ask Remus for his help, but that did not make the prospect any less daunting. The walk ended not long later, and, as usual, Remus was waiting for them by the time they arrived.

"Evening Remus," Harry greeted as he climbed out of the trap door. After nodding at his friend, Harry turned to give Ginny a hand up.

"Hello, Harry," Remus replied while Harry was turned around. "Ginny," he added, as she appeared into the room.

"Hi, Remus," Ginny greeted in return.

Harry looked around the room and noticed that Remus had already conjured a loveseat and an armchair. He led Ginny over to the former as Remus seated himself in the latter. After talking briefly about their day to day lives, Harry turned their conversation onto more serious matters. Before he brought up his summer plans, there was one thing he wanted to know. "Remus, what happened with Snape last weekend? I got Dumbledore to admit that the Order followed my advice, but he wouldn't tell me any more than that."

"After talking it over for a long time, Dumbledore was able to convince the Order to give you a chance. Or rather, Dumbledore quelled the nay-sayers, insisting that Snape's life was too important

to gamble so carelessly,” Remus explained. “He felt that as long as there was a reasonable chance your information was correct, we must act in the interest of preserving our only reliable source amongst Voldemort’s forces.”

“Your only reliable source?” Harry questioned. “But what about now? After my information proved to be correct yet again?”

Remus sighed as he ran a hand down his tired face. “He still feels we must take great caution when dealing with your visions. He worries that it is only a matter of time before Voldemort realises what is going on and turns it against you.”

He felt Ginny take his hand in hers at Remus’ words and could hear the irritation in his own voice as he replied, “I see.”

“He does not mean any insult to you, Harry,” Remus stated sympathetically. “He’s been through more than one war. It has taught him to be cautious – even suspicious.”

“I know,” Harry stated, deflating slightly. “I can’t entirely blame him. But still, is a little bit of loyalty too much to ask?” Ginny squeezed his hand, rubbing her thumb over his knuckles.

“No, it’s not,” Remus responded softly, yet with conviction.

A short silence followed the words, before Harry finally asked, “What was Voldemort after?”

“Rufus Scrimgeour.”

Harry furrowed his brow. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he had no idea where he had heard it before. He heard Ginny whisper, “Rufus Scrimgeour,” to herself before she asked, “Isn’t he an Auror or something?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Remus replied. “He’s the Head of the Auror office at the ministry.”

“What happened?” Harry asked. “What was the potion for?”

“It weakens the mind of the drinker; it makes it easier for a Legilimens to break into his mind, making it easier to put him under the Imperius Curse – which is exactly what Voldemort had in mind.”

Ginny gasped as Harry demanded, “The head of the Aurors is under the Imperius?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Remus stated, dragging a weary hand down his face. “On the bright side, we’re very much aware of the fact and have Tonks and Kingsley in the office. As soon as they get an opportunity, they’ll take care of it.” Remus paused for a moment before adding, “We just have to hope that no serious damage is done before that.”

Harry could only nod his head in reply. Ginny squeezed his hand gently, and Harry turned to smile at her.

She returned his smile before turning to Remus and asking, “Do you have any leads on any future attacks or anything?”

Harry turned back to find Remus shaking his head. “I’m afraid not. We rarely hear anything very far in advance. When we do get a lead, it’s usually no more than a day before the attack.”

“Has there been any more discussion about Jim?” Ginny’s voice again queried.

“Not anything new,” he said. “He’s been brought up a few times, but nobody has had any new thoughts.”

A short silence descended following that statement. Realising his opportunity had arrived, Harry squelched his nerves and cleared his throat. “I was wondering if I could ask a favour of you.”

“Of course,” Remus replied. “What is it?”

Swallowing thickly, Harry ploughed on, "Well, I've kind of been planning to get my own place this summer. I'm sick of spending my summers at the Dursleys' and really want to get off on my own, only I don't really have the time or opportunity to actually look for a place." He trailed off for a second, studying Remus' face to determine how he was taking it. "I was wondering if you might help me find a house." Ginny squeezed his hand again, then let go, gliding her hand over his arm and around to his back where she began to rub circles. Harry turned and smiled at her, moving his hand over to squeeze her knee in thanks.

"I'm not sure if that's such a good idea," Remus stated uneasily, drawing Harry's attention back to him. "I know you can take care of yourself, but it's not safe for you to be out in the open like that. And Dumbledore is not likely to just let you go off on your own. He will track you down."

Harry waved the concerns away. "I've been studying up on the Fidelius Charm. With a little practice, I think I'll be able to cast it over the property."

Remus gaped at him for a moment before asking, "How did you – Where did you find a book on the Fidelius Charm? It's not exactly a common spell."

"My vault," Harry responded. Seeing a look of confusion spread across Remus' face, he clarified, "The Potter vault. I took control of it over the summer and spent some time going through some of it. I've barely scratched the surface, but I made sure to go through the bookshelves first. There were several obscure books that caught my eye."

"And you think you can actually cast it?" Remus queried, not sounding entirely convinced.

"Like I said, it may take some practice runs, but I think I should be able to manage it," Harry stated.

“Well, have you thought about other protections? The Fidelius Charm is great, but without making the place Unplottable, people could still locate the general location of the house, even if they could not gain entry to it,” Remus continued.

“Yes, I’ve read about it and several other protective wards as well,” Harry said.

“You’ve really given this a lot of thought then,” Remus stated with an almost questioning lilt to his voice. “Are you sure you want to go through with this? Have you thought through all the ramifications? Dumbledore will have the Order searching for you all summer long. Hell, he’ll be searching as well.”

“I know, Remus,” Harry replied seriously. “I know it will cause a lot of problems for a lot of people, but I’m sick of having my life dictated for me. I appreciate that the Order looks after me; I really do. But the time when I needed that has passed. If there was a way to do this without causing them trouble, I’d gladly do it. But there’s not.” He paused for a brief moment, considering a new thought. He had never considered it before, but it should make it easier for the Order to accept his independence.

Making his decision, Harry squared his shoulders and said, “When the summer comes, I’ll reveal myself to the Order as Jim. At least then they should know that I can take care of myself. I know it won’t stop them from trying to hunt me down, but hopefully it will ease some of their worries.”

Remus was silent for a long time. Harry remained stationary, his eyes never straying from the man. He could feel Ginny at his side, her presence comforting and reassuring. At long last, Remus sighed heavily and met Harry’s stare. “All right. I’ll help you find a home.” Harry released a heavy breath he had not realised he was holding. “But if any of those wards go wrong, then the deal is off and you either go back to your relatives’ house or you work out something else with Dumbledore. Deal?”

“Deal,” Harry stated without any hesitation, making a silent vow to dedicate himself to those wards from then on. By the time the term ended, he intended to have his new house already warded and ready for him to move in.

It was only a few minutes later when Remus warned them to transform. After wrestling around for a bit in animal form, Harry curled up beside a feline Ginny and drifted off to sleep. It was just a few short hours later that Remus was waking them up and sending them back to the castle.

They managed to get in a couple more hours of sleep before having to get up. They had another Quidditch practice that afternoon. As they had discussed, Ron took it easy on the team. He still pushed them but not as hard as the past couple weeks. Harry felt it was a really good practice overall, and he told Ron as much afterwards.

Harry passed the rest of his day reading about all the wards he intended to put around his home. He intended to dedicate himself to the task until he was sure of his ability to cast all the necessary wards so that they would not become concerns as summer approached. The next day brought with it Harry’s pair of double HA classes – both of which would be visited by Professor McGonagall. The BHA class passed without much fanfare. His seven advanced students were once again duelling each other rather than Harry.

After the lesson, Harry walked down to the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall, chatting over the details of the coming lesson. Harry ate a hurried lunch and retreated back to the Room of Requirement only minutes later. He wanted the extra time to ensure that the room was set up as he wanted it.

Professor McGonagall arrived while he was still checking through things. She left him be until he was finally satisfied that all was as it should be and walked over to her. “All set?” she queried.

“I think so,” he answered. The door opened just then, and four students walked in together. A year ago, to see these four students together would have been quite a strange sight, yet here they were

now, comfortable with each other if not overtly friendly. “Hey, thanks for coming early.”

Answers of “You’re welcome,” and “No problem,” were called back in answer.

“You already know what I want you to do. I assume no one has had a change of heart.” He paused, and four heads shook from side to side. “Excellent. Does anybody have any last minute questions?”

“Yeah,” Blaise spoke up. “What’s Professor McGonagall doing here?” His voice was soft enough that the professor missed mention of her name – either that or she just chose not to react to it.

“It’s a coincidence that she’s here today of all days,” Harry replied. “She monitors my classes once a month. She’ll be moving back and forth between the duels and the spellwork, but she’ll only intervene if she feels it necessary. While I’m occupied, you guys are in charge, and she won’t do anything to undermine your authority.”

That seemed to satisfy Blaise, who nodded his head in acceptance. “I thought of a question,” Susan stated a moment later.

Harry turned to her and offered a smile as he asked, “What is it?”

“What kind of authority do we have? I mean, if any of the students act up, how should we handle that?”

“That’s a good question,” Harry replied. “I hadn’t thought about that. I guess I’ll leave that up to your discretion. You can assign detentions or take house points if you feel it necessary. If anyone gives you trouble about it, have them take it up with me at the end of class. Also, keep in mind that there will always be two of you in command at once. I want you to back each other up should any problems arise. If something comes up and you absolutely need me, I’ll only be in the next room.”

The door to the room opened then, and more students began pouring in. When the door shut behind the last of the students, Harry quieted

the class. "We're going to be starting something a little different today," he announced. He went on to explain what they were to be doing, and he introduced Neville, Susan, Cho, and Blaise as his assistants. He did not miss the look of hurt in Hermione's eyes, but there was nothing he could do for it now. After fielding a couple questions, Harry went on to announce the groups.

To say the class was interesting would be quite an understatement. Harry still found himself amazed at the full capabilities of the Room. He had never thought to actually make the duelling locations lifelike, but that was exactly what Professor McGonagall had suggested, and it worked to a charm. The class was split into six teams. And, two at a time, the teams found themselves walking into what appeared to be Diagon Alley. The only easily notable difference from the real thing was that this place was deserted – and the windows in the shops were mostly all empty.

The door to this side-room within the Room of Requirement placed them on one of the rooftops of the buildings, which is where Harry had decided to take his vantage point. The teams each climbed down and retreated to their starting locations. Harry decided to keep the rules simple for this first day. Each team had only one goal: incapacitate the other team. Harry warned them all not to use any potentially lethal curses, but he was ready to cast a shield should anyone get any funny ideas. There were a few curses that he had taught them that they were forbidden from using, so he knew all of them were capable of it.

Harry had mixed reactions to the results of the exercises. Things had been rather hectic, and no team really seemed to have spent much time on strategy. It was only their first day, however, and there was still time for them to improve. After the last of the students had left, he turned to Professor McGonagall and raised an eyebrow in question.

"What did you think?" she asked.

"Please, sit down," he said as two armchairs materialised in the room. "No reason to do this standing." As Harry moved to one of the chairs, the other disappeared and was replaced with a wooden,

straight-backed chair. "You must really hate Professor Dumbledore's office," he commented lightly.

To his surprise, she laughed. "I find his chairs are horrible for posture," she replied. "But then again, when I am his age, I wonder how much I'll care for posture."

Harry smiled. "Probably not much," he replied. "So how did my four assistants do?"

"Very well," she replied. "You made your choices wisely." She hesitated a moment before adding, "I must admit, I questioned your judgment in choosing Mr. Longbottom over Miss Granger. I am aware that you have had your differences with Miss Granger this year, and I feared you had let them affect your judgment. Mr. Longbottom acquitted himself well; I should not have underestimated him."

Harry smiled widely. "He's come a long way. I don't think you've seen it as much because he's still intimidated by you."

"I suppose there are some drawbacks to being the stern professor," she admitted.

Harry nodded.

"You never answered my question, though," McGonagall stated. "What did you think of the lesson?"

Harry took a moment to contemplate his response before answering. "I think it went pretty well, overall. There's plenty of room for improvement, of course, but for the first lesson, I think they did as well as can be expected."

McGonagall nodded. "I did not see as much of the battles as you, but I felt more or less the same way. There was not much strategy employed, but their spell-casting and basic duelling skills were beyond what I had expected to find. They have clearly been taught well." A smile crossed her features as she said the last, and Harry

had to resist the urge to duck his head down as he felt the warmth rush into his cheeks.

“Thank you.”

She met his gaze and inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment. “I heard a very interesting piece of information during the first lesson this morning.”

“Oh?” he asked, wondering what it was she could have heard.

“When your seven advanced students broke off from the rest of the class, I had a short chat with them,” she explained. “I wanted a chance to ask them about their –” she paused as if searching for the right word – “extra-curricular activities. They were all very enthusiastic, especially when they talked about you, Harry. It is clear that they are quite taken with you; they look up to you.” Harry noticed a glint in her eyes as she continued. “Your parents would be so proud of you, Harry.”

Those words froze Harry’s internal processes. He had not thought of his parents very often lately. He supposed it was only natural that, as he continued to grow older, he would think of them less. The fact that he was keeping so busy only added to it. In that brief moment, he wondered what his parents would think of him right now with all his duplicity and his involvement in the war. Would they too be doing all they could to keep him in the dark? Or would they have allowed him to make his own decisions? He did not get much time to ponder those questions.

“The real interesting thing they told me, though,” McGonagall continued after a moment, “was about your mock-duel a couple weeks back.” She leaned forward in her chair. “It sounds like you put on quite the spectacle.”

Harry, still reeling from her comment about his parents, could only nod in reply.

“I was worried at first,” she commented almost off-handedly. “How you would cope with being both student and professor.” She rose from her chair and stood beside it with one hand on the back of it. “I cannot imagine anyone who could have handled it better than you have. Your very presence seems to command the respect of your students, and yet you are as approachable as any other student in the school. Your ability to effectively teach the material, at this point, goes without question. And your grades in your classes are better than they have ever been in years past.”

“You mentioned to me that you thought it was odd that none of the staff was ever sent to monitor your lessons, and I agreed with you at the time,” she continued. “After just a few visits to your classes, it’s clear that you need no monitor. You are more than capable of handling the responsibility on your own.”

Harry smiled, knowing that such a compliment and a show of trust was not easily given by his stern Head of House. “Thank you, Minerva.” For the first time, her name did not feel foreign on his tongue.

“You’re welcome, Harry,” she replied warmly. “Of course, if you should ever need my help or counsel, my door is always open.” Harry nodded, and she smiled at him as she added, “I have just one favour to ask of you.”

Harry furrowed his brow. “What is it?”

“If it’s all right with you, the next time you participate in a mock-duel, I’d very much like to watch.”

A wide smile stretched across Harry’s face. “I think I can arrange that.”

Their meeting did not last much longer, and Harry soon returned to Gryffindor Tower and his friends. Throughout the evening, whether Harry was reading, doing homework, or playing games, he could not help but notice as Hermione looked at him frequently, though she never met his eyes. Harry had little doubt of what was on Hermione’s

mind, but he had no wish to confront her about it. He hoped that she would just get over it on her own. When Harry retired for the evening without Hermione bringing it up, he thought he might just get his wish.

The next day, however, Hermione continued to behave oddly around him, and Harry was sure it was only a matter of time before she confronted him. His Care of Magical Creatures lesson that afternoon brought with it the reminder that Harry was supposed to be studying up on griffins, but he decided to table that line of research for the time being. Until he was confident in his ability to cast all the wards he needed for his new home, he intended to dedicate all his spare time to the task. Hopefully he would still have time to make headway with the griffin before the end of term.

It was not until the next evening that Hermione finally pulled him aside and asked to talk with him. Harry reluctantly agreed. Her anxiety was rolling off of her in waves, yet she appeared almost reluctant to begin the conversation. Just as Harry was going to speak up, she began talking. "Look, I know it's technically not my place to question what you do with your classes, but I was wondering why you chose Neville over me to lead the spellwork while you're busy. It's not that I think Neville is incapable," she quickly amended. "It's just that nobody understands the material better than I do. I know you were upset with me for a while because you think I'm always on your back about things, but I don't think it's wise to make decisions based on your personal life."

Harry stared at Hermione as though she had a head growing out of her arse – which she might as well have after what she had just said. "And you didn't think that because you were one of my best friends that you should have got the spot? Or that because the DA last year was your idea, that you were entitled to it?" Harry asked her heatedly.

"Of course not!" Hermione responded, outraged.

Harry had to take a couple deep breaths to calm himself down before he said anything else. He wanted to avoid another row with her, and he knew that if he let his emotions run away from him, that was exactly where they were headed. "There are two major reasons why I

chose Neville over you,” he told her. “The first is, as you said, because you understand the material better than anyone.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Hermione protested.

“Perhaps if you let me finish explaining,” Harry suggested. Hermione gave him a sour look, but she waved her hand for him to continue. “The problem is that you understand the material so well, that you don’t know how to explain it in terms that others will understand. You see, you understand everything you read in a textbook, so when someone asks you a question, you give a textbook-like answer. The problem is that a lot of people don’t understand the textbook, which is why they’re asking questions in the first place, so regurgitating the textbook at them doesn’t do any good. Right?”

“So you’re saying all I know how to do is repeat what the textbook says?” Hermione asked, clearly upset.

“Not exactly,” Harry stated. “I’m saying that because you understand the textbook, you never stop to find a simpler explanation.

“And Neville does?” she asked skeptically.

“Yes,” Harry stated. “Neville knows exactly what it’s like to be in that position where you just don’t understand, so he knows how to simplify his explanations so that others can follow along.”

“And what is the other reason?” Hermione demanded.

Harry cringed, wishing he had not enumerated his reasons. “Well, I wanted four people who would work well together without any one of them trying to...” he paused, searching for the right words. “Take control, I guess.”

“And you think that I would?”

“Well, you kind of have a tendency to want to take charge of things – especially anything academic,” Harry explained.

Hermione looked like she wanted to argue the point, but she stopped herself. Harry took advantage of the opportunity to add, "Look, it's not that I don't think you're capable, and it's not that I'm angry at you or anything. I just feel that Neville is a better fit for what I was looking for."

"And this has absolutely nothing to do with whatever problems you've had with me this year?" she asked, her voice still sceptical.

"No, Hermione," Harry responded in a somewhat frustrated tone. "This had nothing to do with that."

"And it has nothing to do with whatever it is you've been hiding from both me and Ron this year?" she queried.

Harry had to catch himself from responding immediately in the negative. "What are you talking about?" he asked, doing his best to sound confused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't play that innocent routine on me. It would take an idiot not to notice you're hiding something. After all the arguments we got into last term, I thought I'd give you some space and let you come to me, but it doesn't appear you had any plans to do so. Seems to me that you're trying to keep me at arm's length."

"Why would you think I was hiding something?" Harry asked both to stall and to try to figure out exactly what she was basing her suspicions on. He would need to know that if he wanted to come up with a plausible explanation.

"Besides the fact that you disappear practically every day for long periods of time with the excuse that you're doing work in your office?" Hermione asked.

"I have a lot on my plate this year," Harry stated defensively. "Between NEWT classes and coming up with lesson plans for the HA, not to mention grading essays for Professor Caldwell, I need all the spare time I can get."

“Besides,” he added. “I like the privacy – and the quiet.”

“Right,” Hermione continued. “Never mind the fact that neither Ron nor I have ever been welcomed to join you in your office. We’ve barely even seen the door of it, let alone the inside. The only person who seems to be welcome is Ginny, and I know she’s been spending time in there with you for longer than you two have been using it for snogging.”

Harry was privately amazed that Hermione was able to make that last statement with a straight face. As it was, Harry was finding himself growing agitated with the third degree he was receiving. “It’s just like I’ve said,” he stated. “I use the office for homework and to read up and plan my HA lessons. It’s also a private place for Ginny and me to talk – among other things.” The last was a direct allusion to the snogging Hermione so callously referred to, but it also covered their Occlumency lessons and whatever else they might get into nicely.

“Whatever you say, Harry,” Hermione commented. “If you don’t want to share with me, that’s your prerogative. But don’t think I’m just going to stand here and let you lie to me.” With that, she turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Harry at quite a loss. He thought he had done a much better job of hiding, but he apparently had not given his long-time friend enough credit. He was going to need to be more careful.

Harry did his best to put his conversation with Hermione behind him, which did not prove as difficult as he expected as his anticipation for Saturday’s Quidditch match grew. Harry’s own excitement surprised even him, but then it had been well over a year since his last real match. As much as he loved the sport and flying in general, an actual match added a whole new level to the game. The nerves he felt in his stomach come Saturday morning were unlike those he felt during his first year; he felt more anxious than nervous. The feeling was there nonetheless, and, though he managed a healthy amount, he was unable to eat as fully as he would have otherwise.

Though it felt much longer, it was less than two hours later that Harry found himself in the Quidditch changing rooms standing before his team. Per his agreement with Professor McGonagall and Ron, Harry would take control of the team come game time, including any game day speeches. Harry was becoming accustomed to the situation after leading the DA and HA respectively for the past two years.

When he turned to address the team, he met Ginny's eyes for just a moment, and she winked at him conspiratorially. A smile stretched across his face as he widened his focus to the rest of the team. "There's not much that needs to be said this morning. Ron's done a great job coaching us and preparing us for today. I feel like we've really come together as a team over the past few weeks. The Ravensclaws have a solid team, but so do we. If we play as well as we did in practice this week, the game is as good as ours, so just play your best, stick to Ron's strategies, and we'll show the school exactly what Gryffindors are made of."

His words were met with a small cry of approval from the team. Harry glanced at the time and realised there were only a couple minutes until they would be called onto the pitch. He had the team line up at the door to the stadium, and just a minute later the announcements began, and they were walking onto the pitch. Harry felt the roar of the crowd on his right hand side, and he turned to survey his red and gold adorned house mates standing and cheering. It took his eyes several seconds to find Neville and Hermione. Hermione was focused elsewhere, but he met Neville's eye for a moment and gave his friend a nod. Turning, he met Ginny's gaze, who then gave a pointed look to her brother who was smiling as he waved to Hermione.

Harry did his best to imitate Ron's smile as he turned back to Ginny and gave an enthusiastic wave. Ginny held her hand up to her mouth as she laughed, then quickly stifled it into a cough as her brother turned to her. She then waved coyly at her brother, who turned confused eyes to Harry. Harry just shrugged at Ron as though he had no idea what Ginny was on about. Any further byplay was interrupted as Madame Hooch the teams to the centre of the pitch. When she asked for the captains to step forward, it took Harry a moment before he realised that meant him.

He walked into the centre of the pitch where Cho Chang was already standing beside Madame Hooch, both watching his approach. Harry returned Cho's smile then turned to their referee as she began speaking. "I want a clean game between your two teams. You all know the rules, and I expect you to abide by them. Now shake hands, and we'll get this started."

Harry turned back to Cho and held out his hand. She took his hand in hers and, as they shook, said, "Good luck, Harry."

"You too, Cho," Harry returned with a smile. "I'll see you up in the air."

With one last smile, she released his hand, and Harry turned and walked back to his waiting team. The balls were released shortly, and the whistle signalling the start of the match resounded through the pitch. Harry vaulted into the skies high above the rest of his team and took a moment to survey them. He was interrupted a moment later when Cho flew up next to him. She said nothing but merely looked down at their teams below, so Harry returned his gaze to the match.

After a moment of watching, Ginny intercepted a pass between two Ravenclaw Chasers and began streaking towards the Ravenclaw goals. "The Weasley girl can really fly," Cho commented.

Harry glanced up at Cho for just a second before returning his eyes to the game. "Ginny," he stated her name rather forcefully, "is an excellent flyer." Just then, the girl in question fainted at the goal and passed the Quaffle back to Katie who scored easily, putting Gryffindor up 10-0. "She's a damn good Chaser too," he added absently.

"Ginny, right," Cho muttered.

Harry looked up at her then and seemed to come back to himself. "Well, I don't know about you, but I'm off to find a Snitch." With that he zoomed off without looking back to see if Cho was following. He began making a circuit of the pitch as he scanned every which way for a fleck of gold. The sun was hidden behind a group of clouds at

the moment, making the process a little more difficult, but it looked as though it would be shining through soon.

As Harry continued to search for the Snitch, he paid a nominal amount of attention to the game. He kept track of the score through the announcer, and it was clear that neither team was going to pull away from the other. The score was back and forth, and neither team ever held a lead of more than thirty points. The score was now 90-80 in favour of Ravenclaw, and Harry had yet to even catch a glimpse of the Snitch. Neither had Cho by the looks of it.

As if she knew he was thinking of her, Cho sidled up to Harry. He slowed down but did not stop scanning the pitch. "Why didn't you just tell me how you felt about her?"

"Huh?" Harry asked, removing his gaze from the pitch and looking into her face. "What do you mean?"

"Ginny," Cho replied as if it were obvious. "Back before the Yule Ball. Why didn't you just say that you liked her? It would have saved me the trouble of humiliating myself."

"I didn't like her then," Harry stated. After a second's thought, he amended, "Or at least, I hadn't realised it yet."

Cho look at him a bit sceptically, but Harry met her gaze unflinchingly. "I never meant to hurt you – or for you to feel humiliated." Harry sighed. "Listen, this really isn't the best time to be talking about this. If you want to talk, let's do it after the match, all right?"

"Sure, Harry," Cho responded.

As she flew off, Harry turned his gaze back down on the pitch as he pondered the behaviour of his one-time crush. He could not imagine why she was still thinking about their brief relationship, but she was clearly holding onto something and unwilling to let go. He wanted to help her, but he did not know how. There was hardly even a relationship to speak of, and she had been quick to move on

afterwards. So why then was she still so attached? The answer was not forthcoming.

When he heard the announcer call out that Gryffindor had just tied the score at 150, Harry looked up into the clouds, wondering when the sun would move past its cover. As he was staring up, he heard a collective gasp in the crowd. He turned his gaze back down as he heard the crowd begin to yell and cheer, and he spotted Cho easily as she zoomed across the pitch. Harry shot after her putting all his effort into going as fast as possible, his owl instincts kicking in as he found a current of air to help him along.

Harry looked ahead of Cho but was unable to spot the Snitch. He was coming at a different angle, so he was unsure how far along exactly he needed to look for the ball of gold. As he was approaching Cho, she suddenly dropped into a dive. Harry followed without a thought, scanning the ground beneath them for the Snitch, but he still saw nothing. He glanced at Cho and could have sworn she was looking at him a moment before. If she had seen the Snitch, she would not have taken her eyes off of it. Harry pulled out of the dive and watched as Cho turned back to look at him and did the same. A groan spread through the crowd as they realised that it was just a feint – the Snitch had not been spotted.

Harry spun around and shot back into the air conscious of the fact that Cho was following. When he had risen above the normal playing height, he slowed down as he resumed his hunt for the Snitch. Cho pulled up alongside him.

“How’d you know I was feinting?” she asked.

Harry turned to face her. “I saw you looking at me. If you had seen the Snitch, you wouldn’t have been watching me.”

“Perhaps not, but it seems awfully risky to gamble on that chance,” Cho returned.

Harry smiled slyly. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“This time,” Cho replied. She smiled at him and, with a wink, sped off. Harry shook his head at her as he returned to his task. It was several minutes later that Harry felt the warmth on his back at the same moment he saw the field light up. It was in that moment that he saw the flash of gold near the Ravenclaw goal posts. He was on the other side of the pitch at the time, and Cho was much closer, though she did not appear to have spotted it yet.

Harry refrained from acting on his instinct to shoot straight towards the golden ball. Instead, he maintained his steady pace across the pitch, swivelling his head from side to side to keep up appearances but never taking his eyes from the elusive Snitch. When he was halfway across the pitch, Harry noticed, out of the corner of his eye, Cho turn abruptly on her broom. He did not hesitate a moment to begin his streak towards the Snitch.

He could just see Cho on the edge of his vision. She had a slight lead on him to the Snitch, but Harry had a faster broom – not to mention the help of his owl instincts. As they approached the golden, winged ball, Harry pulled even and began to push ahead of Cho. He poured all his concentration onto the Snitch as it darted away from the two approaching Seekers. Harry altered his course just slightly. As he closed the distance to the Snitch with Cho at his side, it almost seemed to him as if he could feel the Snitch as much as he could see it.

He could sense a hum of energy, magic. It was a surreal feeling. He was not quite sure what to make of it, but he knew in that brief moment that he need not watch the Snitch’s movements. He was certain that he would not lose the Snitch. He turned his head to the side and winked at Cho even as his hand reached out and closed around the evasive Snitch.

A roar from the crowd suddenly filled Harry’s ears, and he pumped his fist up into the air with his fingers still clutched around the fluttering Snitch. Cho gave him a pointed, questioning look, but he only smiled in return as he turned to join his celebrating teammates. He flew first to Ginny who, through her smile, gave Harry her own inquisitive glance, which he could not interpret. He pulled her into an

embrace and kissed the top of her head while trying to decipher what exactly that look might have meant.

When he released Ginny, he was swept away by his teammates and did not get an opportunity to ask her about it. He noticed Ginny travelling with the team as they slowly made their way to the changing rooms, but she remained on the fringes, while he was trapped firmly in the centre of the group. He could not help but notice that her smile did not quite reach her eyes. She entered the girls' changing room before he had a chance to say anything to her. Harry was directed into the boys' room by Ron, who had an arm around Harry's shoulder as he went on about the various points of interest during the game.

Harry barely heard a word of what was said. As if his chats with Cho and his odd discovery with the Snitch had not left him with enough to contemplate, Ginny's odd behaviour had Harry reeling. In all the time that they had been together – in all the time they had been friends – he had never seen her look at him that way before. There was only one way Harry could think of to describe it; it was a look of doubt.

Harry lingered in the changing rooms, his whirling thoughts leaving him rather preoccupied and not much in the mood to celebrate. Ron was the last of his teammates to leave, and he only did so reluctantly, wanting to go over every little detail of the match with Harry. It was only a promise to do just that later in the evening that finally left Harry in privacy with his thoughts. His mind, however, seemed unable to concentrate on one thing long enough to make any headway.

First there was Cho, though she was the least of his concerns at the moment. Harry wanted her to be happy. He wanted to learn why it was that she was unable to move on, but he had other, more important things to worry about at the moment. The odd sensation he had felt when chasing the Golden Snitch gave Harry an eerie case of déjà vu, as if he had felt something like it before, but he was unable to place where. He did not even know what it was that he was feeling, but he was determined to find out.

Then there was Ginny.

Harry slumped down on the bench, holding his head in his hands. He had no idea what that look had been about, and as much as he could speculate on it, he knew he was getting ahead of himself. He did not really know what he had seen after all. He could be misinterpreting the whole thing. At any rate, there was no sense in sitting around dwelling on it, so Harry shut his locker and strode out the door. He was surprised when, after exiting the room, he came face to face with a familiar female face, but it was not the face he wanted to see.

“Hi Harry.”

“Hey Cho,” Harry replied.

“I hope you don’t mind that I waited for you,” Cho stated.

“Err – no, it’s all right I guess,” Harry responded. “You just caught me by surprise.”

She gave him an odd smirk as she said, “Congratulations on your catch, by the way.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Though I think I could have done without the taunting wink,” she continued good-naturedly.

Harry smiled sheepishly in reply. “Sorry about that. After what I had said earlier about not taking your eyes off the Snitch, I couldn’t resist the opportunity to eat my own words.”

Cho giggled and swatted at his arm. Harry was silent for a moment wondering why she had waited for him. When it did not appear as if Cho would be forthcoming with that little detail, he decided to just ask her.

“Is there a reason why you were waiting for me?”

“Oh, well during the match you said that if I wanted to talk later, just to say so,” she replied. “So I just thought I’d say so.”

“All right,” Harry responded. “Do you mind if we walk and talk at the same time?”

“Sure.”

The two teens began slowly walking towards the castle in silence. After a minute, Harry finally asked, “What did you want to talk about?”

Cho gave him a long, pointed look before answering, “Us.”

“There is no ‘us,’ Cho,” Harry replied. “There barely ever was. You started dating Michael Corner before the end of the term last year. I thought you had moved on.”

Cho did not respond immediately. She kept her gaze forward as they continued to walk. Finally, she turned her head to Harry and said, “I was upset. Michael was there. He was comforting, but I never really cared for him the way I did you.”

Harry sighed. “We gave it a shot last year, and things didn’t exactly turn out very well. A lot has changed since then. I’ve changed since then. I didn’t plan on having anything to do with girls this year. But Ginny, she’s different. I think she’s the first person who has ever really understood me. Don’t get me wrong, I have some great friends, but Ginny has been amazing. I don’t know where I’d be right now if it wasn’t for her.”

They were both silent following his words as they continued their trek until they reached the steps to the castle. Harry stopped in the grass before them and turned to face Cho. “Listen, Cho, whatever there was between us, it’s gone.”

“I know,” Cho interrupted. “I mean, I know in my head that our ship sailed last year, and we missed it. But I just can’t seem to let it go, no matter how hard I try.” She paused and took a deep breath as she seemed to steel herself. “After Cedric, I just – I worried that I’d lost my chance. I was afraid that I had just lost the great love of my life. You

were the only one who gave me hope. Part of me felt guilty, as if I was betraying Cedric.”

She sniffed loudly and wiped her hand across her eyes as she continued, “But another part of me was so thrilled that I was getting another chance, that I hadn’t lost my only opportunity. Now another ship has sailed, and I just don’t know how many more opportunities I’m going to get.”

Harry just stared at her for a moment. He was more than a little shocked at this latest revelation. Swallowing thickly, his mind churning a mile a minute, Harry reached out and gripped her shoulder comfortingly as he replied, “I’m sorry, Cho. I can’t imagine what you went through in losing Cedric.” Harry paused as another loud snuffle left Cho, and he reached into his pocket and conjured a handkerchief, which he handed to Cho.

She accepted the kerchief with a muttered, “Thanks.”

Harry gave her another moment before continuing, “We’re still so young though, Cho. You have your whole life ahead of you to find love. Why are you so worried?”

“That’s the thing,” Cho retorted. “We don’t know how long we have. If I learned one thing from Cedric, it’s that we’re not guaranteed anything in life. At any given moment, it can all be stripped away. With You-Know-Who back, that’s truer now than ever.”

Harry could hardly deny her logic, but he would not give up so easily. “All the more reason to move on and stop dwelling over what could have been between us. You’re a great girl Cho. Any guy would be lucky to be with you. It’s only a matter of time before you find the right one. Trust me.”

“Do you really think so?” Cho asked with a little snuffle.

“I do,” Harry replied. He tentatively reached his other arm around her and pulled her in for a hug. She did not hesitate to throw her arms around him and return the embrace. They just stood there for a

moment, and when he pulled back, Harry gripped her shoulders in his hands as he stood face to face with Cho. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she replied, smiling shyly. "I think I will be."

"Good," Harry said, adopting a more jocular tone. "Because I'm pretty sure I have a Quidditch party to get to. I just won Gryffindor the match, you know."

Cho slapped him on the arm, but her smile told Harry that she took his joke with good humour. They walked up the steps and into the castle together, parting ways inside as they each headed for their own common rooms. Harry was over halfway to Gryffindor Tower by the time his thoughts left his conversation with Cho and returned to Ginny. His talk with Cho, if anything, only made him appreciate Ginny's role in his life all the more. If not for her, he may be wondering, just like Cho, if he would ever find somebody before his time ran out. Without Ginny he would have been very much alone over the past several months, but with Ginny, he felt like he might never feel alone again.

More than anything else, he did not want there to be anything that could get between him and Ginny. He resolved to just ask her about whatever it was that might be bothering her. He knew, however, that it worked both ways. He had been more open with Ginny than anyone else in his life, yet he still had his secrets that he kept even from her. It was one secret in particular that occupied Harry's thoughts – the reason for all his training. He had kept the prophecy hidden from Ginny not due to a lack of trust, but because the information was too sensitive to share with someone who was unable to protect the secret. As long as Voldemort was unable to access that information, Harry had an edge – not because the prophecy gave Harry any great knowledge of how to defeat Voldemort but because Voldemort lacked the knowledge that the prophecy did not spell out anything useful.

Now that Ginny was making progress in her Occlumency lessons, perhaps it was time to open up to her – to let her know the real reason for practically everything that had happened in his life. His thoughts were interrupted as he rounded the last corner and came

upon the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. As Harry spoke the password to the Fat Lady, her portrait swung open, and he climbed into the entrance. Once the portrait shut behind him, Harry heard a voice shout, "There he is!"

The occupants of the common room all turned as one to stare at Harry, and for one brief moment silence hung in the air. The spell then broke as the room erupted into a cheer. Harry smiled and accepted the back slaps and hand shakes all in good nature, but his mind was elsewhere. He turned his head all around searching for Ginny in the crowded room, but he could not spot her mane of red hair anywhere.

The crowds eventually began to lose interest in Harry's presence, and he was free to wander the room unhindered. He found Ron and Hermione sitting together on a sofa near the fireplace.

"Hey Harry," Hermione greeted. They had not spoken much since their confrontation earlier in the week, so Harry was somewhat surprised at the warm greeting. Then again, she did look rather comfortable with Ron's arm around her shoulder.

"Hey," Harry parroted back to her then nodded in greeting to Ron. "Have you guys seen Ginny around at all?"

"She went up to her dorm room," Hermione said, frowning slightly. "She said she had a bit of a headache and wanted to get out of the crowd."

"Oh," Harry responded.

"I wouldn't worry," Hermione added, looking at him a bit funny. "I'm sure she'll be fine."

"Yeah," Harry replied a bit distractedly.

"Yeah, Mate," Ron interjected. "Did you see when Ginny pulled off that reverse Porskoff Ploy? Even I didn't think it'd fake them out that much."

“No,” Harry said, shaking his head. “I must have missed that one.” He paused for a moment and scratched his head. “So having her feint down and throw the ball up really worked that well?”

“Yeah,” Ron said excitedly. “You’d think someone else would have thought to just do the reverse already, but I’ve never heard of it being done before.”

“Well good on you then for coming up with it,” Harry replied. “Maybe they’ll name that the Weasley Ploy.”

Ron’s eyes went wide as he stared at Harry. Hermione looked from Ron to Harry and back to Ron again as she started laughing. Harry chuckled along with her at Ron’s expression.

“Really, Harry,” Hermione said after a moment. “They’d need to name it something a little catchier than that. The Weasley Wile has a much better ring to it, and it uses alliteration, which they seem to be fond of.”

Harry smiled even as he held up his hands in surrender. He was glad that Hermione was not allowing their issues to overshadow the good mood created by the Quidditch victory – particularly with Ron there. “All right, the Weasley Wile it is.”

Ron was looking back and forth between them as if trying to decipher whether or not they were being serious. Harry just smiled widely at his friend. “I’m going to wander around a bit. I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

Hermione bid him farewell, but Ron was still too preoccupied to do more than just nod at Harry. As Harry turned, he caught sight of the staircase up to the girls’ dorms. He knew he could never get up those stairs without setting off the alarm, but perhaps there was another way. Looking around to make sure no one was watching him, he darted up the boys’ stairs and into his dorm room. He threw open the window and transformed into his owl form. With several hard beats of

his wings, he brought himself up to the windowsill and launched himself out into the open air.

For just a moment Harry worried that he might have some difficulty finding the right window, but, as his owl senses kicked in, he knew exactly where he needed to go. It took only a moment to reach her window, but it was a minute or so before he was able to draw Ginny to the pane of glass. He stared into her eyes silently pleading with her to let him in as he beat his wings to stay level with the window.

Her shoulders sagged just a little bit as a soft smile played at the corner of her lips. She undid the latch on the window and pushed it open, stepping back to allow Harry entrance. Rather than immediately change back into human form, Harry alighted on Ginny's shoulder and nipped playfully at her ear, earning himself a stifled giggle as Ginny mock-scolled him, calling, "Harry."

He left her shoulder and transformed back into his normal form before reaching the ground. "Hey," he said. "Hermione said you weren't feeling well."

She looked away from him as she softly said, "Yeah, I have a bit of a headache."

"Do you?" Harry questioned, his gaze never straying from her face. She turned completely away from him, and Harry stepped forward, laying a hand on her shoulder and letting it slide down her arm to her hand. He tugged gently, trying to coax her into facing him. When, after a moment, she relented, he brought his hand up to her face and rubbed his thumb across her cheek. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," she replied, trying to smile but not quite succeeding.

Harry eyed her sceptically. "If it's nothing, why are you hiding up here in your room instead of celebrating with everyone else?"

"I felt like being alone," she responded shortly. Before he could prod her any further, she asked, "What were you and Cho talking about?"

Harry furrowed his brow at her question but dutifully answered. "Not much really. You – relationships in general," he explained succinctly. He did not feel comfortable divulging Cho's personal business – even to Ginny.

"And the fact that she still likes you," Ginny inserted. Harry was unable to pin the emotion underlying her tone.

"The fact that she is confused about her feelings," Harry corrected. "Why are you so interested in Cho all of a sudden?"

"I'm only interested in finding out why she's interested in you all of a sudden," Ginny retorted.

"She was having trouble putting the past behind her," Harry stated as calmly as he could. Truth be told, he was more than a little bothered by the way Ginny was acting.

She laughed bitterly in response. "Right, Harry. Something tells me she has no intention of putting the past behind her."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I heard her, Harry, last term. I listened outside the door as she tried to talk you into dumping me and taking her to the dance." Harry could see a spark of irritation and anger in her eyes. "Don't even try to tell me that she has no feelings for you."

"What are you so upset about?" Harry asked. "It's like I said, she's confused about her feelings. She knows that there won't ever be anything between us again, and, after Cedric, she's scared she'll never find anyone else. So she's finding it difficult to move on."

"Or she's using her grief," – it was clear from her tone exactly how she felt about the sincerity of Cho's feelings – "to worm her way back into your arms."

"I can't believe you would think so little of me," Harry said, his voice soft and unsure. Since he had realised his feelings for Ginny, he had

never even once thought of another girl in a romantic sense. He had never been happier with anyone in his entire life. They had only really been friends for less than a year, yet now he could hardly imagine what life would be like without her. Throughout everything he had gone through since September, she had been the one constant in his life. She was his rock. He had never seen her trust or faith in him waver, and he had never realised how much comfort that simple fact had given him until now.

“Well, it already worked, didn’t it?” she asked.

“You were spying on me?” Harry asked in disbelief. The realisation that she could trust him so little shook him to his very core.

“You were in plain view,” she responded. “Anyone glancing out a window on that side of the castle would have seen you.”

“I don’t care what anyone else could have seen,” Harry bit out, anger building up inside of him. “You don’t trust me.”

“I don’t trust her!” Ginny all but screamed.

“And you think what – that I’d just toss you aside at the first opportunity?” Harry returned heatedly.

“No,” Ginny exclaimed. Pulling at her hair with both hands, she added, “I don’t know.” In the blink of an eye, she deflated before Harry’s eyes. She sagged onto her bed, and Harry noticed tears forming in her eyes. “I’m scared.” The words were said so softly that Harry was not sure he heard her correctly – or that she had even said anything at all.

Harry’s anger vanished as quickly as Ginny’s, and he approached her cautiously, kneeling down in front of her bed and taking one of her hands into his. “Ginny, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“I’m scared,” she repeated loudly, swiping angrily at her eyes with her free hand.

“Scared of what?” Harry prodded in a soothing tone.

She was quiet for a short moment before pulling her hand from his and letting out a frustrated groan as she held her head in both hands. Harry wanted to comfort her, but he was not sure how. He did not even know what was wrong. There was nothing he could do but wait. It was a couple long minutes later before Ginny even looked at him again, and when she did it was with only one eye as she peered between her hands, still clutched to her face as if to hide herself. Harry met her cycloptic stare steadily, determined to get to the root of whatever it was that was troubling her.

Finally, she peeled her hands away from her face, but she averted her gaze, staring down at Harry’s chest rather than meeting him in the eye. “You’re going to think I’m stupid,” she said in a defeated voice.

“I won’t think you’re stupid,” Harry stated. “I promise.”

She sighed. Her eyes lifted up to meet his gaze for just a fraction of a second before they flicked up over his head. “You know how I used to have a crush on you back when I was little?”

Harry nodded, confused at where she was going. “Yes.”

“It took me a long time to get over that,” she continued. “It took me forever just to get to a point where I could talk to you.” From her voice it was clear that she was disgusted with how shy and insecure she had been. “But I finally – finally – moved past it. I never stopped caring for you, but I was sick of feeling paralyzed whenever you were around. I wanted to be your friend.”

Harry just sat back on his heels unsure how to take what she was saying. He wanted to comfort her, to take her hand, to hold her, but he was rooted to the spot and could only listen as she went on.

“After last year, I finally felt good about myself in regards to you. We weren’t best friends by any stretch of the imagination, but I felt like I had actually helped you – that I had made more of myself than just

Ron's stupid little sister. You have no idea how shocked I was when I heard from you over the summer. I realise now why you were able to say the things you did and why you chose to write me first. But that doesn't matter. When school started and I learned your secret, I felt so empowered. To know that I gained your trust when no one else had – I was thrilled.”

Harry kept his silence even as she paused, sensing that she needed to get everything out of her system.

“As we got further into term, I realised I was starting to have feelings for you again, but I refused to let my feelings affect me. You needed me, and I was determined to be there for you – to help in any way I could. As time passed, my feelings for you only grew no matter how hard I fought against them. After the ball, when you had nearly kissed me, you seemed to pull away, and I was convinced that you had decided you'd made a mistake – that you didn't really share my feelings and had only nearly kissed me because you were lost in the moment. Even then, I would not let myself get torn up. After all I had been through with my crush on you, I would never let my emotions rule me so completely again.” She again swiped the tears from her eyes and sniffled loudly before continuing. “Then you finally came around, and since then things have been so wonderful. I almost can't believe it. Never, even in my wildest fantasies at ten years old, could I have imagined you could make me as happy as you do, Harry – that I could feel so strongly for you.”

Harry reached out and squeezed Ginny's hand, his eyes shining with affection for her. He realised belatedly how difficult it must have been for her as a child and how determined she must have been to be able to put all of that beyond her and still want to be friends with him. She allowed him to squeeze her hand for just a short moment before she pulled away.

“But no matter how good – how right – this feels between us, I can't shake my past self,” she explained, her voice laced with frustration. “After all I went through to get over you, part of me demands to know why now? Why did it take you so long to realise your feelings? And what are your feelings exactly?”

Ginny shook her head as she continued. “No matter how I try to move past it – no matter how ridiculous it sounds, even to my own ears – I can’t help but wonder if it’s not really me. This past year, you’ve been alienated from everyone in your life. You cut them all out of this driving force in your life, and I’ve been the only one there. I was the only one you could talk to – the only one you could be open with. So I wonder, is it me?” She paused, wiping the tears in her eyes. She shifted her gaze then, meeting his eyes for the first time in all her monologue. Her voice lost all its life as she resumed. “Had it been some other girl you saved in Diagon Alley – some other girl who discovered your secret – would you have fallen for her instead?”

And then she wept.

At her first sob, Harry immediately sat beside her on the bed and pulled her into his embrace. She fought him for just a moment before giving in and bawling into his robes. To say Harry was at a loss would be an understatement. Never once in his time with Ginny had he questioned it. Nothing had ever felt so right in all his life. A part of him was angry with her for her doubts, but he did his best to temper that emotion. Getting angry would solve nothing. All it took was one look at her shaking form for his anger to melt away, but no matter how much he wanted to comfort and reassure Ginny, he knew he needed to think over all that she had just revealed. After she had poured her heart out to him, it would be an insult to her to disregard her fears without first taking the time to process everything.

As Harry held Ginny in his arms, he thought over her questions. What would have happened had someone else discovered his secrets? No answers were forthcoming. At the time, he had been so dead set on hiding from absolutely everybody, Harry was not sure how he would have reacted. When Ginny had discovered his identity, he had received quite a scare. It was well after the fact that he actually considered the possibility of letting her in and confiding in her.

He had very briefly considered a memory charm, but Harry knew that he could never in good conscience cast such a spell on a friend – especially when he had not had any practice with it. He had then determined to use the life-debt she owed him as a means to ensure

her silence – the fact that it was Ginny meant that she owed him doubly, and he was certain he could use that as leverage should she protest.

Instead, he had allowed himself to consider what would happen if he decided to be open with her. Harry had soon realised that he had absolutely no reason to mistrust her. Sure, it was taking a huge risk, but she deserved at least a chance to earn his trust. He decided to test the waters with her, and things just snowballed from there.

So what would he have done if it had not been Ginny? Well, Hermione, for one, was irrelevant to the situation as Harry was certain he would not have developed feelings for her regardless of the circumstances. But any other girl? Harry could say, with relative certainty, that had it been any other girl, he would have gone with his first plan to use the life-debt to ensure her silence. It was only the fact that it was Ginny that made him reconsider.

Even if, for the sake of argument, he did decide to confide in the other girl, he could not imagine falling for anyone else the way he did for Ginny. No other girl could understand him the way she did. No other girl would have given up all her free time and social life to train with him. Harry was the one with the prophecy hanging over his head; he had little choice but to prepare for what lay ahead. Ginny, however, had the choice, and she still chose to walk beside him on his path.

As Harry rubbed her back comfortingly, Ginny's sobs slowly began to subside until the only sound heard in the empty dormitory was the occasional hitching of her breath. He brought his other hand up and tenderly brushed the stray tendrils of hair off her face, tucking them behind her ear. He then let his hand glide to her cheek and urged her to lift her face up to meet his. As his eyes met hers, Harry froze. The intense longing in her eyes made the words catch in his throat, and he suddenly forgot all that he wanted to say.

He knew, however, that she needed to hear it, so he shakily began, "Ginny, I – you're not just some convenience. I mean, you – you mean everything to me. I can't imagine ever feeling this way about another girl, and you have no idea how lucky I feel to be with you. It has nothing to do with the fact that you discovered my secret. It's the

fact that I finally got to know you – you, Ginny, not just Ron’s sister or the girl with the crush on me. I – I hadn’t planned on getting involved with anyone this year. After all the time I wasted last year worrying about things with Cho, I couldn’t afford another distraction like that. But then you came along, and you’ve been the exact opposite. You’ve kept me going through all the distractions and the problems. You understand me like no one else ever has, and yet you haven’t even really known me well for a year.”

He was stopped from saying anything further by Ginny’s hand covering his mouth. She appeared as though she wanted to say something, but instead she reached her hand around Harry’s neck and pulled his head in, crushing his lips to hers. Harry allowed himself to get lost in her kiss for just a moment before he pulled away. He sat there, panting slightly as he struggled to regain his breath, with just a few inches separating his face from hers. “Ginny, there’s – there’s something I need to tell you.”

He tilted his head slightly and rested his forehead against hers, closing his eyes as he tried to find some way to tell her. “Whatever it is, Harry, you can tell me,” Ginny’s whispered, though her voice belied her uncertainty.

Harry opened his eyes as he continued. “It’s – well, it’s something I’ve wanted to tell you for the longest time, but I couldn’t – not until you had the means to protect it.”

Ginny pulled back from him, her brow furrowing in concern. “What is it?”

“Do you remember the prophecy?” Harry asked, his eyes downcast.

“The one that was destroyed in the Department of Mysteries?” Ginny asked.

“Yes,” Harry replied, looking up and locking his eyes with hers. “I know what it says.”

Chapter 23: Foreseen and Unforeseen

Ginny called the training dummies to a halt, turning to watch as Harry blindly stalked forward, his head turning this way and that as he clearly had no idea where his own opponents were. Just then, one of the dummies threw a curse at Harry. He reacted in a fraction of a second, rolling to the side and throwing several of his own curses in the general direction of the offending dummy. None of the curses hit their mark, and she could faintly hear a muttered curse.

She had warned him that it would take some time to grow accustomed to the lack of sight, but he had just waved her concerns aside, asserting that he would meet the challenge. Granted, he had improved a lot over the past couple weeks. She could recall the first session she had witnessed where Harry literally stumbled about getting hexed left and right. She could vividly recall his skin reddened by countless stinging hexes and the look of both fatigue and frustration on his face as he ambled limply into the shower room.

After two weeks of constant hard work, he was now able to avoid hexes fairly well, though the dummies were not very aggressive. He would work up to more rigorous assaults. He was unable, however, to do anything to counter their attacks. By the time he managed to dodge the hexes – which he insisted on doing since with a Death Eater you never knew what they were going to throw at you – he regularly failed to find his target with his return fire.

As she watched him return to his feet and resume his slow stalking, she decided to have a little fun. She pulled out her wand and crept towards him, being careful not to make a sound. As she drew within about twenty paces of him, Harry turned towards her, his brow furrowing in confusion. Ginny stopped dead in her tracks wondering if he had somehow heard her, even though she thought she had been silent. Harry's blind gaze never left hers, and his confusion suddenly bloomed into understanding as he whipped off his blindfold and said, "Thought you could sneak up on me, huh?"

Just then, one of the dummies behind him threw a hex. Harry spun away at the last second but was too late to avoid the spell. The

Stinger hit him in the shoulder, and he winced in pain. Without a word uttered, the dummies froze and then promptly disappeared.

Ginny took that moment to ask, "How did you know?"

Harry seemed to gather his thoughts for a moment before stating, "I could feel you."

"What?" she asked reflexively.

"The way I can feel magic," Harry explained with a slight shrug. "I don't know how to explain it, but I could feel you coming closer. I didn't know what it was at first, but then I realised it could only be you."

"Oh," she said. After a moment of silence she added, "Well it's about time to call it quits. That's why I came over."

Harry shot her a wry smirk as he responded, "I think you were looking to do a little more than just tell me it was time to call it quits."

Ginny chose to ignore that comment as she remarked, "You're getting a lot better. You nearly hit it that last time."

He shook his head. "You were right," he admitted. "It's been much more difficult to adjust than I had anticipated."

"You'll get there, Harry," she stated. "You just need to give it some time."

"Besides," she added, "it's not as if you really are blind. You only need to be able to avoid hexes coming from your back."

"True," Harry conceded. "But I want to get to a point where I don't even need to think about it. If I'm too focused on feeling for any spells coming from behind, I'm liable to just get hurt from the front."

Ginny shrugged, having no response. "I'm going to wash up." As she ambled over into the shower room, she could not stop her mind from

wandering back to the day that had led to Harry's new training regimen. It had been quite a harrowing day. The stress of the Quidditch match ended up being the least of her concerns. She had been troubled when she first saw Harry chatting with Cho up in the sky but had put it out of mind in order to concentrate on the game. When she saw Harry turn back to Cho right before catching the Snitch, however, she could not help but wonder exactly what that was about.

She had been tempted to just hex the girl when she had noticed Cho hanging around the Gryffindor boys' changing room after the match, but she managed to rein in her temper and let it go. Harry had chosen her, after all, even when Cho had given him the opportunity to resume their relationship last term. Ginny had planned on just hanging out in her room until she had regained control of her emotions and put it all behind her. After all, she trusted Harry, and she knew he was no longer interested in Cho, even if she did feel he was being a bit naïve about her motives. Her insecurities were nothing new; Cho had just been the catalyst to bring them out, and when Harry showed up in her room, she had lost control and spilled her heart out to him.

Thinking back on it now, she was rather amazed with Harry for how he handled that conversation. She knew most guys would have lost their cool and become defensive, but he had taken her concerns seriously and actually answered them to the best of his ability. Much as she hated to admit it, she had felt so much better after that night. No matter how wonderful her relationship with Harry was, Ginny had never quite managed to shake off her doubts and fears. As much as Harry had changed over the year, he was still rather reserved. Their relationship was going so well, and she knew she should not be worried, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not help but wonder if his feelings were anywhere near as intense as hers.

Back when she had first met Harry at King's Cross at the tender age of ten, she had fancied herself in love with the boy. She was obviously a bit misguided in her youth, but who could blame a girl who had just met the hero of her dreams – literally. For not only did Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, feature in the bedtime stories her

father and, on occasion, Bill used to tell her, he also featured in more than one of her dreams.

But now – now that she was older and more mature – she could not help wondering if her younger self had some seer blood in her. She was not quite ready to call it love; it felt odd to even be thinking about it at this stage of her life. She only knew that she had never felt so intensely for anyone in all her life. They had never really talked about the extent of their feelings or their relationship. In the beginning, it had never entered her mind. Everything was just so wonderful between them that it was like the words were not even needed.

But then the doubt crept into her mind. What if she was reading more into their relationship than was there? Yes, things were great with them, but what of the future? Where was it going? She was not looking for a proposal – she would have hexed him good for outright stupidity if he tried anything like that – but she needed to know how he felt about their relationship. She needed to know before she lost herself even further in it – in him – but she did not know how to broach the subject. In truth, a part of her had been terrified to do so.

Harry had not made any grand statements or promises that day, but he had said enough to allay her worries. Just the tone of his voice was enough to see that he felt as overwhelmed by his feelings for her as she did for him. His words had been a balm to her soul. His revelation immediately afterwards had put it right back in turmoil. The prophecy had initially left her stunned. She could not fathom how he dealt with it, the knowledge that he would have to face down Voldemort and win – that he was their only hope.

Once she had recovered from the initial shock, things began to click in place in her mind. Suddenly, everything made so much more sense. It explained why Voldemort was so obsessed with Harry. It was not simply a matter of pride or of demoralizing the Wizarding World by taking away their saviour and hope. Voldemort feared the prophecy. As long as Harry lived, Voldemort would always fear the day Harry and the prophecy caught back up to him.

The prophecy also went so far in explaining Harry's drive and dedication to his training this year. It had seemed odd to her at first

that he had done so much in such a short span of time and that he was so singularly focused and determined to train and to fight. Now it all made sense. He was unwilling to wait for Dumbledore to deem him ready. The longer he waited, the more people would die and the less time he would have to prepare. Harry's sense of responsibility would not allow him to just sit back and do nothing, not when he knew what his role would be.

Though she was terrified for him and his future, she had faith in Harry. Every day she saw first hand what he had been able to accomplish in less than a year. She knew that if anyone could pull it off, save Dumbledore himself, it was Harry. After hours of contemplation in her bed that afternoon, she had made a vow to herself not to allow Voldemort or this prophecy to intimidate her. She had then marched down the stairs into the common room, dropped herself onto Harry's lap, and snogged him senseless right in front of everyone – much to Ron's consternation and sputtering.

It was not until late that evening that Harry mentioned the sensation he had felt with the Snitch. It was a couple days later when they managed to put it together and realise what it actually meant. Hours later, Harry was already beginning his blindfolded training in the Room of Requirement. His dedication never ceased to amaze her. Even with the prophecy, she knew most people in his shoes would not have applied themselves the way Harry did.

As silly and clichéd as it sounded, he was her inspiration. Without his example to follow, she knew that she would never have begun training. The same could be said for all the members of the HA. It was his example they all followed, but, given her private training with Harry, it was truer of her than anyone else. She only wished she could learn as quickly as Harry seemed to. Though she was making some progress on the wandless magic front, it was slow going.

She had finally mastered the initial simple spells, like Wingardium Leviosa and Accio. Now, she was trying to cast minor hexes and curses wandlessly and was meeting with limited success. Her control was sporadic. Some spells came out significantly weaker than others, and she tended to tire out much more quickly than she would have if casting with a wand. Harry assured her that he had experienced the

same thing early in his training and that she just needed to push through it to build up her endurance.

Her training with the dummies and, occasionally, with Harry was going much better, but, as Harry frequently reminded her, until she was seventeen, she could only use wandless magic outside of Hogwarts. So while that branch of training was certainly necessary, until she became proficient wandlessly, she would be unable to accompany and aid Harry when he left the safety of the castle. She tried not to think about that fact more than necessary.

There was also the matter of learning to Apparate so that she could actually travel with Harry without needing to use Side-Along-Apparation every time, but arranging for Apparation lessons would not be easy. Apparation inside Hogwarts was impossible, so even if she wanted to try it, she would have to leave the castle grounds. But even then, she would need to be proficient using wandless magic before she could even attempt it because using her wand outside of Hogwarts would alert the Ministry to the fact that she was not only using magic outside of school but also Apparating while underage. She had no idea how they were going to get around that particular roadblock.

She still had a long way to go in her training, and, to make matters worse, her professors were really beginning to bear down on her as the O.W.L.s were rapidly approaching. She had decided that her training with Harry was more important than O.W.L.s, but she could not just ignore her classes. She needed to complete all the work that was assigned to her, and, as the year progressed, that was taking up more and more of her time.

After she finished washing up, Ginny dressed and walked back out into the main room and almost immediately found herself face to face with Harry. He leaned down and gave her a quick peck on the lips. She smirked right back at him as she teasingly asked, "Were you using your new ability to spy on me while I was in there?" She jerked her head back in the direction of the shower room she had just left.

“I guess you could say that,” Harry admitted. “Not like it’s all that exciting. I can’t see anything, but after I felt you earlier, I wanted to see if I could do it again.”

“A likely story,” she retorted. Feeling rather mischievous she added, “If you wanted a peek, Potter, all you had to do was ask.”

Her smirk widened as she saw Harry’s eyes flick down her body, and his face coloured. While the school robes were bulky and hid a lot, hers were getting a bit snug in certain areas, and she knew where Harry’s eyes and mind were going. As his eyes lingered, Ginny felt a shiver travel down her spine; she had never felt as sexy as she did then, seeing the unconcealed desire in his eyes. Winking at him, she grabbed his hand. “Come on, Perv, or we’ll be late to supper.”

OoOoO

Harry allowed himself to be dragged towards the door leading out of the Room of Requirement, his mind and his eyes still a bit preoccupied. After all, with Ginny, the view from behind was every bit as sweet as from in front. It was only after they had left the room that he stopped staring and started walking alongside her rather than trailing behind. He held onto her hand even though she was no longer using it to lead him.

They made their way into the Great Hall and took their seats at the Gryffindor table opposite Ron and Hermione with Harry sitting beside Neville. As Harry was loading his plate, Hermione put down her fork as she asked, “So what did you two get up to this afternoon?”

Harry did not bat an eye at the question, though he knew it was not as innocuous as it seemed. For the past two weeks, Hermione had not failed to ask him that question pretty much any time he spent more than an hour in either his office or the Room of Requirement. “A little bit of studying and worked on some lesson plans for the HA,” he replied easily and then took a bite of his potatoes.

“Oh?” Hermione responded in what seemed to be somewhat of a forced surprise. “I stopped by your office after Herbology, and nobody responded when I knocked.”

Harry had to resist the urge to groan. She was getting more and more persistent in tracking him. It was rather annoying. “I spent some time in the Room of Requirement before supper practicing a new spell I’m thinking of covering soon.”

“Really?” Her excitement was not entirely feigned as she asked, “What spell?”

Before Harry could respond, however, Ron interjected, “Blimey, Hermione. Let the man eat.”

Harry smiled gratefully at Ron before tucking into his meal. Neville took advantage of the break in conversation to bring up something they covered in their Herbology class that afternoon, diverting Hermione’s attention. Harry tuned out the conversation at that point as he pondered what to do about Hermione’s inquisitiveness. The fact that she was taking a few extra classes helped him to disappear at times, but he knew Hermione would not be deterred. There was little chance of her discovering how he was using his time, but the fact that she was posing questions and actively trying to track him made his life all the more difficult. The real test, however, would come the next time he needed to leave the castle. He would need to be extra careful lest Hermione discover his absence.

Following the meal, Harry ascended the spiral staircase leading to Dumbledore’s office for their weekly Occlumency meeting. Though they talked for the entire session, they never hit on anything of consequence; in fact, they had not touched on anything important since Dumbledore had once again shut Harry out following the ordeal with Snape. Without a topic to catch his interest and distract him, Harry was able to remain focused for the duration of the lesson and blocked every attempt by Dumbledore to break into his mind. Following the lesson, Harry retired to the common room where he spent the remainder of the evening in the company of his friends and house mates.

After breakfast the next morning, Harry intended to make his way to the Room of Requirement for another training session. He would be starting off solo, but Ginny was supposed to join him after her morning class. While walking up a stairway leading to the sixth floor, he heard a muffled exclamation behind him. He turned around but could not see anything or anyone. He spun back around when something occurred to him. He concentrated on his new sense and tried to find any magic nearby. The walls gave a steady buzz of magic that was so faint that he hardly even noticed, but he could sense a more concentrated bit of magic further down the stairs and tucked away in an alcove.

He puzzled over the source of the magic for just a moment before noticing the similarity to what he had felt the previous day when Ginny had attempted to sneak up on him. He was being followed. Harry furrowed his brow as he resumed walking, trying to guess why he was being followed and by whom. Well, he had a pretty good guess to both questions. The real question was what to do about it. Given the path he had taken, it would already be clear to his follower where he was heading – there was nothing of interest on the sixth floor, and this would be a rather circuitous route to get to Gryffindor Tower –so changing course at this point would only alert the person that he was aware of her presence as well as give her reason to suspect he was trying to hide what he was doing. Harry decided to just continue on as if nothing was amiss.

There was still the matter of what to do when he actually arrived at his destination. Should he ward the room as he usually did? It was possible that she may have followed him in the past, so not warding the room might seem suspicious. But if she had not yet followed him to the Room of Requirement, he could avoid the question of why he was warding the room when he was supposedly only practicing spells to be taught in his HA classes.

As he turned the corner into the corridor housing the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy, Harry realised his time was running out. As he paced back and forth in front of the portrait three times, he came to a decision. Throwing open the door, Harry stepped inside and shut it behind him. He threw up his standard wards, but he also included a

spell to allow him to both see and hear through the door as if it was not even there. As he cast that final spell, he could not help the smirk that spread across his lips as he thought of the last time he had used it. The memory of Snape's reaction to Malfoy disrobing in his office never failed to bring a smirk to Harry's lips.

Harry just stood there, staring out the opening at the portrait of Barnabus the Barmy, waiting for his follower to reveal herself. A minute passed by, and nobody came. Harry furrowed his brow but remained still. After another minute, he spun on his heel. There was no sense just standing around all day wasting time. He had originally intended to begin with his blindfolded training, but he wanted to be able to keep an eye on the door, so he chose to push that particular drill back.

Just as he was beginning some more conventional work with the training dummies, he noticed a figure walk in front of the door. With hardly a thought, the dummies disappeared, and Harry moved back over to the door. Standing there silhouetted in the archway was Hermione. Though he had been certain it was her, he could not help the feeling of irritation and betrayal at seeing her trying to spy on him. Sadly, he had expected no less from her, but even that foreknowledge was not enough to help the sting. He did his best to shove those feelings aside. It was his choice to keep her in the dark. She might not be in the right, but he knew she was acting the only way she knew how. Hermione reached a hand out, and Harry watched with some amusement as her hand seemed to close around absolutely nothing, though he knew she had gripped the door handle. Almost imperceptibly, she turned her wrist to find that the door was locked.

It appeared that she expected this as she did not seem the least bit surprised or perturbed. She withdrew her hand and pulled out her wand. She whispered the incantation, "Alohamora."

Nothing happened. She again gripped the doorknob and found it still locked. She released a muffled harrumph and then furrowed her brow as she cast another spell which surprised Harry slightly. "Aperiobex."

That particular spell was used to reveal any wards cast upon the target. Apparently she had come prepared, but Harry wondered if she would recognise what the spell showed her. Hermione's brow furrowed as she seemingly studied Harry, but he knew she was actually viewing the wards he had placed on the door. She reached into her robes and pulled out a quill and a roll of parchment and stepped to the side of the door, using the wall to write against as she scribbled some notes. Harry had little doubt of where Hermione was heading after she finished jotting down her observations.

Deciding that he was unlikely to learn anything else from spying on his bushy-haired friend, Harry resumed his training. He ran through his different drills with determination until he heard the door opening. Turning, he watched as Ginny strolled inside. Since Ginny began training with him, Harry had modified his wards slightly to allow entrance to Ginny if she tapped her wand in a specific pattern over the door, his inspiration coming from the entranceway into Diagon Alley.

Harry gave her a short wave in greeting, to which she called, "Hey Harry." She walked over and gave him a brief kiss.

Deciding he had better warn her about Hermione, he said, "We may have a problem." He proceeded to explain to her how Hermione had followed him and her discovery of the wards he placed on the door.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Ginny responded. "In fact, I thought she would have followed long before now."

"Me too," Harry agreed. "But now that she is on my case, I'm going to need you to be extra careful from now on, particularly when you're tapping out the sequence to let you into the room."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm not stupid, Harry. Of course I'll be careful. I'm always careful."

"I know," Harry admitted. "I just can't let her catch on. We just need to make it to summer, and then the secret will be out anyway. But I can't risk Dumbledore catching on before then."

“I know, Harry,” Ginny stated softly, lifting her hand to his cheek. “You’ve made it this far. I’m not going to blow it for you, and neither will you. All Hermione knows is that you’re using this room and that you don’t want to be disturbed. For all she knows, the Room could have provided the wards based on what you asked it for.”

Harry cocked his head to the side as he considered her words. “You know, I hadn’t thought of that. But with everything else the Room can do, I wouldn’t be surprised if it could do that.”

“And if Dumbledore himself couldn’t connect any spells to you when you were casting wandlessly, I don’t imagine Hermione will either,” Ginny added.

Harry smiled at her as he leaned down to capture her lips in his. “You’re right. You know, I think I like having you around.” Harry teased as he pulled back a long moment later. “I might just have to keep you.”

She smacked him on the arm. “Someone needs to keep you in check. You can’t do everything, you know.”

“Close enough,” Harry retorted. “But you’re not here to see what I can do. So let’s see what you can do.”

OoOoO

Hermione missed lunch that day. Harry did not know if he should be glad for her absence or not. On the one hand, it saved him from further inquiry. On the other hand, it meant Hermione was no doubt in full research mode in the library, which could not bode well for him. He did not use any wards so advanced that she would not be able to find them in the Hogwarts Library. They would not be simple to track down, but it was only a matter of time before she began putting all the pieces together. Even after she did, though, she would still need to find a way past those wards, which would not prove easy by any stretch of the imagination.

Ron seemed confused and just the slightest bit put out by his girlfriend's nonappearance, but he was doing his best to hide it as he inhaled enough food to feed a full-grown dragon. The real surprise, for both Ron and Harry, came as they sat in the Defence classroom with the seconds ticking down to when class was set to begin. Just as Professor Caldwell was rising, the door burst open and a harried Hermione scrambled inside, uttering a distracted apology as she made her way to her seat, casting a sidelong glance in Harry's direction.

"Wonder what's gotten into her," Neville whispered at his side.

Harry turned his head slightly to look at Neville to find the boy watching him rather than Hermione. His expression was nearly unreadable as Harry replied, "No idea."

Any further conversation was halted as Professor Caldwell called the class to attention, but Harry could not help his mind wandering. Something about the look Neville had given him told him he knew more than he was letting on, but how much more? He could not peg Neville as the type to spy on him the way Hermione was doing, but Harry suspected that Neville noticed far more than he ever let on.

As he was packing up at the end of class, Harry was surprised when Neville leaned over and whispered, "I was wondering if I could talk to you – alone."

Harry straightened up and turned to look at Neville who seemed the slightest bit nervous. It was an emotion becoming more and more foreign as Neville continued to grow more confident in himself and his abilities, and Harry wondered what it was that would evoke that emotion in him. His mind immediately made the connection to the beginning of class and the look Neville had given him. Harry sincerely hoped that he was not about to gain another friend on his case.

"Sure, Neville," he replied. "We can talk in my office."

Neville nodded his agreement and grabbed his bag. Harry slung his own pack over his shoulder and led Neville out of the classroom. As

they walked through the halls, they were both quiet. It was not exactly an uncomfortable silence, but Harry's curiosity grew with every step. By the time they entered his office, he was quite eager to learn what it was that Neville wanted. Unfortunately, Neville looked far from comfortable and did not actually seem in any hurry to talk despite the fact that he had been the one to initiate this little meeting.

Harry suggested he have a seat, but Neville distractedly waved away the offer. Harry leaned against his desk, half-sitting on the desktop, as he surveyed his friend. After giving Neville a moment to begin, Harry prodded, "So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Neville seemed to draw himself up as he began, "Well, there's a Hogsmeade weekend a week from tomorrow, and Hannah's birthday is coming up. I hadn't exactly planned on having a girlfriend, and, well, Gran's always been a bit funny about sending me money. Plus, I haven't exactly told her about Hannah. Well, I told her about the Yule Ball but haven't told her that we're dating yet."

"Neville," Harry interrupted, chuckling lightly. "You're rambling."

"Right, I guess I am," he agreed with a sigh. After a moment, he straightened up and seemed to steel himself for whatever it was he was driving at. "What I'm trying to ask is if you have some extra money that I could borrow to buy Hannah's gift."

It took a moment to recover from his surprise at the request, but when he did he responded, "Sure, it's no problem." He was just happy that this conversation had absolutely nothing to do with why Hermione was digging into his life.

"I promise I'll pay you back," Neville stated quickly. "I just don't know when I'll get a chance."

"It's okay, Neville," Harry assured him. "I'm not at all concerned about that. How much do you need?"

"I dunno," he replied. "I don't know what to get her. I was just going to look into a few shops, see what I could find." He paused a moment

before asking, "How much do you reckon I should spend on a birthday gift?"

Harry shook his head. "I have no idea, mate. I'm as new to this stuff as you are. Ginny's birthday isn't until August."

"But didn't you buy her Emerald?" Neville questioned.

"Yes, I suppose I did," Harry stated. "But we weren't dating at the time, so it was different."

Neville scoffed. "She loves that cat."

Harry shrugged. Not knowing how else to respond, he changed the topic back to the matter at hand. "So what do you think then?"

"I don't want to leave you Knut-less," Neville started.

Harry shook his head as he interjected, "That won't be a problem."

"Well, I still have a bit of money left. If I could borrow maybe five galleons, I think that should be enough," Neville stated.

"That's fine," Harry agreed. His money pouch was in his trunk, and he briefly considered just pulling it out and retrieving the coins right then and there but then thought better of it. No matter how much he thought he could trust Neville, it was just simpler to keep as much to himself as possible. "I don't have the money on me, so I'll have to give it to you later. Just remind me in case I forget."

"Yeah, sounds good," Neville said. "And thanks, Harry."

"Any time, Neville," Harry returned.

Smiling, Neville stretched out a moment as he said, "I guess I'll get out of your hair. I'm sure you've got plenty to do."

Something about the way he said that gave Harry pause. "Now why would you say that?" Harry asked curiously.

Neville shrugged his shoulders. "You're always busy these days." With that, he strode over to the door. Looking back over his shoulder, he called, "See ya, Harry."

"Later, Neville," Harry responded as the door swung shut behind his friend. For a moment, Harry just stood where he was, shaking his head. Hermione might view him as a mystery, but right now Harry was having a difficult time pegging Neville. He was almost certain Neville knew something, but apart from offering an occasional knowing look, he never even acknowledged that anything odd was going on. Neville had often intervened, throughout the year, whenever Hermione would get a bit too pushy in her inquiries of Harry. At first, Harry had just taken it at face value, but now he was beginning to suspect that Neville knew there was more going on underneath the surface.

Perhaps Harry was just looking too far into things, or maybe Neville just chose not to pry. Either way, Harry knew he just had to continue as normal. If Neville planned to do anything with the knowledge he may have, there was little he could do about it except do everything he could to prevent him from learning more. If Neville ever decided to confront him, Harry would cross that bridge when they came to it. After all, he needed only hold out until the end of the term before his secret would be out anyway, and Neville did not appear to pose any sort of threat to that goal. He had always been one to respect a person's privacy.

As long as he had the time alone in his office, Harry decided to dive back into his study on wards. That was one area he felt he could not learn enough. There appeared to be many intricacies to ward casting. He had only dabbled with some of the simpler wards, but the ones he planned to put around his new home, particularly when combined, would seriously put his skills to the test, and he intended to be fully prepared for the challenge.

There was still over a week before the next full moon, but Harry was already looking forward to the chance to meet with Remus again. He was anxious to hear if Remus had made any headway on what was to be his new home. The sooner they could get started on everything,

the better. Harry did not know much about the whole process, but he imagined it would take some time to negotiate and complete the sale. Only after they had finished all that could he actually begin casting the wards over the property, and he wanted to have plenty of time to concentrate on the wards in case any problems arose.

That night Harry's sleep began peacefully but grew more and more fitful as the hours passed. As the morning drew near, he found himself being drawn across the bond he shared with Voldemort. Preparing himself for the discomfort, Harry used his Occlumency skills to drown out all his feelings and emotions as the dim light of Voldemort's lair entered his vision. Already kneeling down in front of him was a group of about five Death Eaters.

"I have a special job for you this morning," Voldemort hissed at the cloaked figures. "While the others will be attacking out in the open, killing and destroying all that stands in their way, you five will use them as a distraction to accomplish my true goal. It is no coincidence that Harry Potter holds a wand whose core is a brother to my own. Your incompetence cost me the contents of the prophecy. Now, I give you the opportunity to redeem yourselves."

"Bring me the wandmaker," he continued. Harry had to suppress his momentary surprise at learning Voldemort's target: Ollivander, the creepy, old wandmaker. "I want answers, and who better to give them than the one who crafted both wands." He could sense there was something more that Voldemort was not saying, and he wondered if he even truly believed Ollivander could offer him anything. Perhaps this was just another one of his attempts to root out a potential spy. Unfortunately, Voldemort kept his thoughts closely guarded, so Harry was unable to decipher more than the vague emotion.

"Yes, my Lord," the group chorused. As they did so, Harry got his first look at a couple of their faces. He would recognise the faces of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange anywhere.

"Do not fail me," Voldemort hissed at the group, his eyes lingering on Lucius' face. He was pleased to see the fear in the man's eyes just before Lucius ducked his head down. Harry was not sure if he

should also celebrate the man's fear or be revolted at the emotion Voldemort was feeling. There was certainly no love lost between the elder Malfoy and Harry, but he was not sure he would wish Voldemort's particular brand of punishment on anybody. But if anyone deserved it, Malfoy was near the top of the list.

As the vision faded and Harry felt himself returning to his own body, he considered what to do. He got out of bed and began dressing. His first course of action was to inform Dumbledore, of course, so the Order could be put on the alert. But then, what would he do about the situation? He knew the attack would occur some time this morning, but it would be risky to spend the entire morning outside the castle. Luckily it was a Saturday, so he need not worry about missing lessons. Unfortunately, someone, most notably Hermione, was liable to notice his absence if he was missing for too long. When news of the attack came out, there was a decent chance she would make the connection. It was a risk he could not afford.

He was not willing, however, to just sit back and leave things to the Order. As long as he was healthy and able to fight, he wanted to be out there doing his part. He arrived at Dumbledore's office without coming to any conclusions. Speaking the password, Harry rode the spiral staircase up to the door of the headmaster's office and knocked soundly.

"Come in," Dumbledore's voice welcomed.

Harry pushed the door open and, given the early hour, was surprised to find that the headmaster was not alone. Sitting before his desk were Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore greeted. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Harry caught a twinge in Snape's shoulders at the word pleasure but ignored the man's reaction. "Good morning Headmaster, Professors," Harry briskly greeted in reply. "I had another vision last night."

Harry noticed Snape's eyes narrow as McGonagall managed to sit up straighter in her chair – a feat Harry would not have thought possible. Dumbledore merely nodded as if he had expected as much. Why else would Harry be in his office so early in the morning?

“And what did you see?” Dumbledore queried in a neutral tone.

“He's planning an attack on Diagon Alley this morning,” Harry responded. “I'm not sure the details of the main attack, but it's only a diversion anyway. He met with a group of five Death Eaters – the only two I could see and recognise were Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange. He tasked them with kidnapping Ollivander while the others drew away the attention of the Aurors.”

“Ollivander?” Dumbledore repeated questioningly.

Harry shrugged. “He said he wants to know about the connection between our wands. He might think that our brother wands are somehow connected to the prophecy.”

“You are not certain?” McGonagall inquired.

“No,” Harry shook his head. “All he said is that it was no coincidence that we shared a common core in our wands.”

“I see,” Dumbledore commented. Then, turning to Snape, he asked, “Severus, have you heard anything about this?”

Snape's gaze left Harry for a moment as he almost imperceptibly shook his head at the headmaster. “No,” he responded. Turning back to glare at Harry he continued, “The Dark Lord has mentioned nothing.”

“I think there might be more to it,” Harry stated uncertainly. “I think he might still be trying to root out a possible spy.”

“You think?” Dumbledore asked as Snape scoffed. A quelling look from the headmaster stopped Snape from saying anything. The

headmaster's eyes then turned back to Harry as he waited for an answer.

"Well, I'm not sure," Harry stated. "He was kind of hard to read. I got the feeling that there was a lot more that he wasn't telling them, but he didn't quite feel as anxious or anything as the last time." If anything, Snape's glare became even more malevolent at his last statement.

"Very well," Dumbledore said. "Is there anything else that you can remember? A time? Or any other details that might aid us?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "He only mentioned that it would be happening in the morning – nothing else."

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore replied. "You have been most helpful."

Harry had to stifle the flare of irritation he felt at the implied dismissal. Carefully keeping his voice neutral, he said, "You're welcome." With that, he nodded once more to McGonagall and briefly met Fawkes' gaze before turning on his heel and exiting the room. He took a deep breath on the landing outside the office door and briefly considered sticking around to eavesdrop, but he felt the proposition was too risky and proceeded down the stairs. Dumbledore likely had some way to monitor who was outside his door – if he could not just see right through walls like Moody. Harry would not put it past him.

That triggered a frightening thought. What if Dumbledore could see through walls? If he ever wanted to find out what Harry was up to in his training sessions in the Room of Requirement or even in the privacy of his office, Dumbledore might not even need to enter the room or touch Harry's wards. He might just be able to peek through the walls. Harry was unsure, given the nature of the Room of Requirement, whether or not it was possible, but it should definitely be possible inside his office. He vowed to be much more careful from then on. The fact that Dumbledore had not yet caught him suggested that the man either lacked that specific ability or that he just was not keeping tabs on Harry inside the castle. Either way, he could not take

anything for granted and decided he had best look into ways to block out such an ability. He vaguely recalled reading about some sort of ward that might do the trick, but he would have to look it up to be certain.

As Harry approached Gryffindor Tower, his thoughts finally returned to the impending attack on Diagon Alley. Harry sighed, seeing nothing for it. Even if he somehow found a way to be notified when the attack began, by the time he managed to exit the castle and Apparate in, the battle could already be over. He would just have to hope his absence did not raise any eyebrows. He still had time yet, though, as the sun was only now rising. The Death Eaters would not attack until the Alley was sure to be busy.

He retrieved one of his books on wards and read in the common room until Ginny came down the stairs for their morning workout. Setting up a quick privacy ward, he explained to her everything that was going on. After brief consideration, he decided he had time for their usual morning jog before heading over to Diagon Alley – he did not want anyone to notice his absence from his normal routine. Not wanting to tire himself out prior to the battle, he just ran alongside Ginny at her regular pace. She had improved a lot since starting up with him a few months earlier, but for every step she took forward, Harry took one himself – and his stride was a bit longer than hers. The jog was more invigorating than tiring for Harry.

After doing some stretches, he walked Ginny to the Room of Requirement. Rather than join her, he decided to head over to the Alley now. After a brief but intense goodbye, Harry made his transformation into Jim, threw his Invisibility Cloak around his shoulders, and made his way up to the Owlery. After transforming into his owl form, he greeted Hedwig but declined her offer to fly with him. He planned to Apparate as soon as he left the school grounds.

As soon as Harry reverted back to human form outside the castle grounds, he Apparated into Diagon Alley while still under his Invisibility Cloak. He quickly ducked into an alley and transformed back into owl form. He hoped someone from the Order would notice him flying around prior to the battle to reinforce their belief that he was actually two people. While hoping they would spot him, Harry

was scoping the grounds for Order members he had run into as Jim. He had learned his lesson at St Mungo's that it was better to work with the Order than on his own. There was too much risk of something going wrong.

He noticed Kingsley first but decided against approaching the Auror. He did not know Kingsley well and had no idea how he would react to Jim attempting to work with him. After sweeping the entire Alley up in the skies, Harry was unable to spot any other Order members, so he decided to swoop down lower to get a closer look.

Harry migrated from perch to perch across the Alley, staying no more than a minute in each spot as he scouted the area. He thought he spied Tonks near Gringotts, but he was not certain. Given her abilities, she was difficult to spot – except when she chose to wear her hair in pink, purple, blue, or some other exotic colour. As he was trying to decide whether or not it was her, he realised that Jim would not know about her Metamorphmagus ability, so there was no way he could approach Tonks as Jim unless she looked just like she did when at St Mungo's or Madame Bones' house, which she did not.

In any case, if that was Tonks, there was a pretty decent chance that Remus would be nearby. Both times he had run into them previously, one never strayed far from the other. Sure enough, it only took a minute of scanning before he noticed Remus peeking out the window of a nearby store.

Harry took off from his perch and flew into a deserted alleyway before transforming back into human form. He was still wearing his Invisibility Cloak, so he whipped off the garment and quickly tucked it into his trunk. After making sure he was properly disguised, he strode out into Diagon Alley and made his way over to the store where he had noticed Remus. As he walked by the woman he had thought might be Tonks, he noticed her eyes tracking him. He concentrated on trying to feel her magic but felt bombarded by the multitude of wizards and witches around him. He was unable to focus on Tonks specifically and trying to do so nearly resulted in him tripping over his own feet. He gave it up and resumed his trek to meet up with Remus.

As he walked in front of the shop, he met eyes with Remus for a fraction of a second before continuing on to the door. As he opened it, he glanced back and noticed that Tonks was, in fact, following him a short distance away. He strode into the shop and made his way over to Remus. "Fancy meeting you here," Harry casually greeted.

Harry smirked as Remus rolled his eyes. "Funny. One might think you were following us."

"Hardly," Harry replied. "If you'll recall, I beat you to St Mungo's."

"And if you'll recall," Tonks voiced harshly behind him, "you'd've gotten yourself killed if we hadn't come to your rescue."

Harry turned slowly to face the witch. "I guess we'll call it even then."

"Easy, Tonks," Remus soothed. "We're all on the same side here."

"I know what side we're on," Tonks stated. "His side has yet to be determined."

Harry smirked as he realised Remus had just given him a perfect opportunity. "Tonks? You don't look anything like..." He paused as he adopted a look of sudden realisation. "Metamorphmagus?" he questioned to Tonks.

She sneered and turned her head to Remus. "Way to go, Wolfie."

"Wolfie?" Harry repeated. Then his eyes lit up.

"Tonks!" Remus exclaimed.

She seemed to realise her mistake then as she immediately looked contrite and mouthed the word, "Sorry."

Harry turned back to Remus and quietly asked, "Werewolf?"

Remus just nodded with his eyes downcast. He was doing a smashing job of playing his part. Harry nodded his head once curtly.

"I knew a werewolf once, back when I was younger. He was a good bloke."

"So, anyway," Remus stated, pointedly changing the conversation. "What brings you here?"

"Well, I imagine the same thing that brings you here," Harry replied evenly.

"And just how do you know why we're here?" Tonks inquired suspiciously.

"Why else would you be here?" Harry retorted. "You might be able to explain your presence at Diagon Alley, except for the fact that neither of you – nor the rest of your team – are doing anything but standing around surveying the crowds." He shook his head at them. "You're not exactly being subtle about it."

"Yes, well, not all of us are as good at hiding our true forms as others," Tonks replied giving him a hard look. It sounded funny coming from a Metamorphmagus, but Harry was now relatively certain at least one Order member had noticed him flying around.

He just raised an eyebrow in response. "So, did your source give you any details on what's going down?" Harry asked, trying to both change the subject and come up with ways to legitimise his cover.

"Our source?" Remus asked.

"Well, unless you just randomly guess where the next Death Eater attack will occur, I'm guessing you have some sort of source in Voldemort's circle," Harry remarked.

Tonks looked sharply at him at his use of Voldemort's name. Her eyes were calculating as they studied him. "We don't know much," she replied evenly.

"But we do know a little," Remus interjected. "We're expecting a major attack in the Alley, but that is only a diversion."

“A diversion?” Harry asked, feigning surprise.

Tonks cleared her throat rather pointedly, and Remus met her eye as he said, “If we’re going to work together, it might be best to share our intel.”

Tonks’ glare said as clearly as words, I don’t trust him.

“So what’s the real goal?” Harry asked, turning back to Remus.

“Ollivander.”

“The wandmaker?” Harry asked. “What does Voldemort want with him?”

“We don’t know,” Tonks quickly supplied as if worried Remus would tell him everything if given half a chance.

Harry studied Tonks for a long moment before asking the obvious question. “If Ollivander is the target, why aren’t you guarding his shop?”

“We have people guarding him,” Remus inserted. “But we also need people to help control the rest of the Death Eaters.”

Harry nodded. “Makes sense.”

“So what about you?” Tonks questioned. “Your source tell you anything else?”

Harry shook his head. “All I know is that there’s supposed to be an attack here sometime this morning. I didn’t know there were any ulterior motives until you just said so.” Harry cocked his head slightly at Tonks as an idea came to him. He considered it a moment before deciding to go for it. “Can I ask you something?” Harry directed at Tonks. He hesitated a brief moment before continuing, “Why is it that you don’t trust me at all?”

“You haven’t given us a lot to trust,” Tonks replied briskly.

“So helping you out – possibly even saving your life – and fighting Death Eaters at your side on multiple occasions, that does nothing to garner your trust?” he asked. He really was curious. He wanted to know what it was that set Tonks on edge around him.

“Why don’t you ever stick around after the fight?” Tonks retorted. “We don’t know anything about you. We don’t know what your goals are. Sure, you’re fighting on our side now, but we don’t know what you’re fighting for. Is it against the Death Eaters in general, or are you looking for one in particular? And what happens when there are no more Death Eaters around? Will you still be an ally then?”

Harry nodded mostly to himself. “Fair questions. I can’t give you all the answers you want, but I think, since we seem to be working together frequently, a little trust is warranted. I’m in this thing for the long haul and don’t plan on quitting until the job is done. That’s no more Death Eaters and no more Voldemort. I haven’t given too much thought as to what I’ll do after that, but I don’t think you need to worry about me stepping on your toes. All I want is to put an end to the war.”

“And how do we know you’re telling the truth?” Tonks asked.

Harry shrugged. “I have no reason to lie. Look, after what happened at the hospital, I realised a few things. If it wasn’t for you two and your partner, I would’ve died that night. If I want to see this thing through to the end, I’m going to need a little help. So, as long as we have the same goal, I was hoping you might be willing to work together.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Remus interjected. “Perhaps you might consider working a little more closely with us in the future.”

Harry furrowed his eyebrows wondering what Remus was playing at. “Why don’t we save that conversation for another time? We are supposed to be keeping a look out for Death Eaters, right?”

Tonks grumbled a bit and muttered what sounded like a goodbye as she excused herself from the store. Once the door shut, Harry turned back to Remus and gave the man a wink. His smile died on his lips, though, as he felt a cold feeling creep into his chest.

Remus must have noticed the change in his face as he asked, "What's wrong?"

As the feeling increased, the chill spread through his body, and Harry could hear a distant screaming. Though he could not tell if the sound was real or in his head, he knew the source. Only one thing could invoke that feeling. He turned to Remus who was still staring at him in concern. How could he not feel that?

"Dementors," Harry whispered. As Remus' eyes widened, something occurred to Harry. "Remus, I can't..." Dropping his voice to a whisper, he continued, "Everyone knows my Patronus is a stag. If anyone sees it, my cover is blown."

Remus studied him for a moment before responding, "Stay near me. My Patronus has never been that strong, but it should hold enough for the two of us."

Harry nodded, but the feeling only intensified as the seconds dragged on.

"I can feel it too," Remus stated. "Come on, we'll be useless inside the shop."

Harry followed Remus out into the Alley and his eyes immediately scanned first to his left then to his right. He could not see the dark figures, but it was clear they were drawing near. He noticed Tonks just one shop down on his right on the opposite side of the street. He was surprised to find Remus facing the opposite direction, but then he realised that the man must trust her to be able to take care of herself. He wondered if he would be able to do the same if Ginny were there.

His thoughts were interrupted as he heard the first scream – the first real scream. Spinning around, he saw the dark cloaked figures drifting down from the rooftops. Looking up, he saw there were a few dropping down nearby. “Remus,” he warned. “You got that Patronus ready?”

Rather than a reply, he heard the incantation, “Expecto Patronum.”

Harry glanced over to see a silver form taking shape. It was low to the ground and rather small, but Harry did not get a good enough look at it to determine what animal it was, nor did he think now was the best time to ask. Witches and wizards were running down the street without direction, each running from a single threat, unaware that the threat was coming from all directions. He could spot the scattered Order members remarkably easily down the street as they were the only ones exhibiting a modicum of composure in the relative chaos. They held their ground as they cast their Patronuses to quell the threat.

Harry, for his part, felt helpless and rather worthless as he just stood by, fake wand at the ready, watching the Patronus forms as the Order tried to contain the Dementors. That feeling left a moment later as he noticed a group of Death Eaters surge out from a small alley in-between two nearby shops. Harry wasted no time as he began firing curses at the black robed figures.

They came out near Tonks, and Harry glanced over at her to find that she was still busy directing her Patronus and had not noticed the approaching Death Eaters. Even as he cast a shield in front of her, Harry yelled out, “Tonks!”

She froze mid-turn as she noticed the beam of light deflected inches from her face. Harry worked his way towards her as she began duelling with the Death Eaters. It was true chaos as Harry manoeuvred around stray shoppers, trying to draw the curses away from them as he continued his attack. Of the group of five that had emerged, only two were left standing, but more groups were pouring out into the streets, and, with most of the Order occupied, the Dementors were pushing past the fading Patronuses.

Harry pushed his way further down the Alley, continuing the firefight with a new wave of Death Eaters. As he saw a group of Dementors escape their containment and converge on a mother and her two children, Harry did not hesitate a second. Consequences be damned; he would not do nothing while others were in danger. While in the past, he had encountered difficulty finding a strong enough memory to conjure a corporeal Patronus, now there was no question. With an image of Ginny in his mind, he bellowed, "Expecto Patronum!"

Not sparing a second, he immediately resumed spell-fire against the Death Eaters. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the shiny, silver mist taking form. He paused in shock as the form that sprinted down the Alley was not the one he expected. The majestic stag that had for years protected him from the Dementors was gone. As the animal pounced at the foul creatures – just in the nick of time – Harry's jaw dropped as he realised what form it had taken.

His moment of distraction cost him as Harry felt something barrel into him from the side. As he flew towards the ground, he noticed a flash of green light pass by and erupt into the building beside him, spraying bits of rock everywhere. He slammed into the ground and skidded across the pavement with a heavy weight falling on him. He began pushing the weight off until everything came into focus and he realised that the weight was actually Tonks. "What's the matter, never produced a Patronus before?" she asked as she helped him up in the cover of an alcove.

Harry shook his head as it took a moment for the situation and her words to catch up to him. "No," he finally responded.

"Well, you can admire it later," she stated.

"Right," Harry replied, stamping down the irritation he felt at her words. After all, she had just saved his life. "Thanks," he whispered.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Couldn't let you go knowing I still owed you one," she teased. "Now, how about we get back to it?"

Without waiting for his reply, she jumped back into the fray. Harry barely hesitated before following. He soon realised where she was heading, as he saw Remus engaged with a few Death Eaters just two shops down. Harry tried to ignore the bodies on the ground as they pressed forward. Some of them wore the telltale robes of the Death Eaters, but far more of them were dressed in normal, everyday robes. There was no time to think of that now.

They quickly caught up with Remus and immediately jumped into the skirmish with another group of Death Eaters. They fought from behind the cover of a short, stone wall, and Harry found it a bit frustrating working side by side with Remus and Tonks as it largely eliminated his ability to move around a lot. He was basically trapped behind the wall at their sides as they tried to systematically take down the small group of Death Eaters before them.

It was difficult to make any headway from behind their cover. Harry was distinctly reminded of his mock-duel in his BHA class where he had taken on his seven advanced members. They had relied heavily on their cover, and it had been their downfall. It was too easy to spot when a spell was coming. There was just too much time to either throw up a shield or step out of the way. Harry ducked behind the wall as a sickeningly green curse flew towards him. It impacted the top of the wall, sending bits of stone flying over his crouched form.

This was useless. Turning to Remus he asked, "Do you have any more of those magic grenades?"

Remus' eyes widened momentarily, and he nodded his head as he reached into his pocket, pulling out two of the devices. Harry smirked, taking the two balls and pressing the buttons. He counted in his mind. One. Two. He popped up and threw the two balls yelling, "Cover me," to his two comrades. Three. Harry leapt over the wall and sprinted towards the Death Eaters' cover, wandlessly conjuring a shield in front of himself. Four.

The balls exploded right behind the group of Death Eaters interrupting their curses and giving Harry the moment he needed. He was already hurling a powerful Blasting Curse at the group, knocking down two of the six. Harry flanked to the side of the Death Eaters as

he continued to throw curses, allowing Tonks and Remus to add their own spells to the mix. Within moments, the entire group was out for the count.

The danger was far from over, however, as there were battles still being waged all down Diagon Alley. Not wasting any time, Harry Summoned the six wands and quickly destroyed them as Remus and Tonks approached. Remus was frowning slightly at Harry but thankfully said nothing. For good measure, Harry attempted to Summon any Portkeys on the six bodies but was unsurprised when nothing happened.

Turning to Remus he asked, "Can you set up another anti-Portkey ward?"

"Sure," Remus nodded his agreement and turned around to do just that.

Harry turned his attention back to the unconscious robed figures and immediately set to work binding them. Tonks joined him after a moment. As Harry moved onto the next body, he felt Tonks' eyes on him and turned to her, raising an eyebrow.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?" she asked. The open distrust and dislike she had shown him prior to the battle had vanished, much to Harry's pleasure, and he could see the curiosity shining in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked, glancing over at Remus to see that he was still working on the wards. He moved onto another Death Eater as Tonks did the same.

"We cover a lot of different fighting styles in Auror training," Tonks replied. "But I've never seen anyone fight like you do. I was just wondering where you had learned."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I'm mostly self-taught," he admitted with a grin. He turned away from her and bound the last Death Eater.

“Mostly?” she queried.

Before he could even consider his response, Remus interrupted. “Done.”

They quickly moved all the bodies – totalling about a dozen – into the warded area and pressed further down the Alley, joining up with another pair of Aurors – or maybe Order members, Harry was not sure. As they came upon another group of Dementors, Harry was the first to conjure his Patronus, earning him a surprised glare from Remus. He did his best to ignore the look as he watched the silver lioness corral the fetid creatures. He did not have time to let his eyes linger on his Patronus, however, as spell-fire came flying in their direction from another group of Death Eaters using a small alley in-between buildings as cover.

As Harry manoeuvred his way closer to the group, he could see past them into the alley where two Death Eaters had their wands trained on a young woman and her child. He could just make out the scream tearing out of the mother’s throat as she writhed in agony on the ground. Harry saw red.

He jumped out from behind his cover, casting several powerful Blasting Curses over the Death Eaters’ heads. The spells connected with the building, sending chunks of stone falling on the heads of his enemies. Harry wasted no time sprinting towards them, hardly giving it a second thought as he quickly Stunned and Blasted the lot of them out of the way. He tore into the alley catching the tormenters by surprise as he quickly knocked the both of them unconscious, not even consciously paying attention to what spells he hit them with.

He knelt down to check on their victims. The mother was clutching her child, who Harry could now see was quite young, probably no more than a year old. The baby was crying, the sound heartbreaking as the mother just lay there on the ground, holding her close. “Are you okay?” he asked the mother, reaching out his hand but wary of touching her, not knowing what injuries she may have incurred.

She gave no response; she did not appear to even notice his presence. Not seeing anything for it, Harry gripped her shoulder and shook her lightly. "Can you hear me?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

Her eyes seemed to slowly move towards him as if she was having difficulty focusing. Finally, her gaze settled, and the terror on her face seemed to abate as she saw him there. "M-my baby," she gasped through her shaky breaths.

Harry took a closer look at the child, wondering if perhaps she had been injured, but he could not see anything wrong with her. He held a hand to the child's cheek, lightly brushing against the skin, causing her eyes to pop open in the midst of her continual cries. Unlike her mother, she had no trouble focusing on Harry, though she did not seem as capable of determining friend from foe as his presence seemed to do nothing to calm her down.

Turning his attention back to the mother he asked, "Are you going to be all right?"

She seemed finally to be regaining her senses as she nodded her head shakily. She struggled as she attempted to sit up, and Harry carefully slipped his arm around her back to help her. He helped position her to lean up against the wall as the mother met his eyes once again. "Thank you," she said. Her eyes lingered for just a moment before shifting down to her child.

Harry mumbled, "You're welcome," in reply as he quickly stood and turned around. He Summoned the wands of the nearby Death Eaters and quickly snapped them. He had to climb over the pile of stone and bodies at the front of the alley before making his way back into the streets proper. It seemed a stretch of the word, but things were a bit calmer as he noticed the fighting now appeared to be isolated to his left side. He spotted Remus and Tonks a couple stores down and quickly ran over to regroup with them.

As he came up beside Remus, the man turned to him and asked, "Were they all right?"

Harry frowned momentarily, realising that Remus must have looked in on him in the alley before moving down the street. "Yeah. The mother was a little banged up, but she should be okay. I don't think they managed to touch her daughter yet."

Remus nodded. "Good," he said, turning back to the battle.

It was only a couple minutes before the Death Eaters seemed to comprehend that their numbers were beginning to dwindle. That was when, predictably, one of them pulled out a Portkey, causing all of them to disappear. Harry cursed as he realised that, though they had taken the time to set up wards around one small group of Death Eaters, he had neglected to do the same for the rest.

Remus turned to Harry, "Well, I guess that means you'll be leaving us."

"Pity," Tonks interjected as she stepped beside Remus. "I was just starting to enjoy your company."

Harry had to suppress the urge to roll his eyes. "Likewise," he replied. As he allowed his gaze to sweep from side to side, Harry was horrified to see the amount of destruction wreaked upon the Alley. If this is what the Death Eaters could accomplish when he and the Order were prepared for the attack, Harry feared what the scene would have been like had they not known it was coming. Bodies were strewn everywhere, and none of the buildings seemed to have been spared, though some were definitely worse off than others.

Part of Harry resisted the urge to leave, knowing that his help was still needed here, but he knew that he could not. It was too much to risk. Without the battle raging around him, the Order members would no doubt want to talk with him, and he did not want to even give them the chance to learn anything about him. He was also pushing his luck staying away from Hogwarts this long. The longer he delayed, the more likely someone was to discover he was missing. "I'm sorry I can't help you clean up," he said to the two of them, hoping they would both, especially Tonks, hear the sincerity in his words.

Meeting each of their eyes momentarily, Harry Disapparated, popping back into his usual spot in the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He quickly discarded his disguise and flew back into Hogwarts in his owl form. Using his Invisibility Cloak, Harry worked his way through the halls, being extra careful not to bump into any of the wandering students or make any noise. When he finally made it to his office, he let himself inside and immediately pulled out his trunk. He showered in the bathroom in his trunk and quickly healed the minor scrapes and bruises he had accumulated in the battle. Afterwards, Harry dressed back in regular school robes and, glancing at the time, realised that lunch would be starting shortly.

Walking over to the portrait of the Gryffindor common room, he stated, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." As his eyes scanned the map for Ginny's name, he wished he had included some feature to quickly locate a person. He made a mental note to look into it when he had more time. He finally found her name amongst the numerous students in the Gryffindor common room, so he set the map back to normal and exited his office for Gryffindor Tower.

As he approached it, the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and a stream of students poured out. He could not help the smile tugging on his lips as he noticed Ginny among them. At her side was Neville, with Ron and Hermione behind them.

His eyes locked with Ginny's a moment later, and she called out, "Harry!" She quickened her pace and flung her arms around him, and he happily returned her embrace.

The other three separated from the crowd as well, and Harry spoke loud enough for them to hear. "Sorry I'm late. I dozed off while studying in my office."

As they separated, Harry kept one arm around Ginny's back as he turned to address the others. "Hey guys, how's it going?"

"Dreadful," Ron immediately replied. "They've done nothing but revisions all morning. It's enough to drive a bloke barmy."

Harry smirked as Hermione scoffed. "Honestly, Ron. You can't leave everything to the last minute, especially with exams coming up."

"We have almost two months before exams," Ron whined.

"I know," Hermione stated. "It's hardly enough time."

Harry shook his head as they began trailing the crowd of Gryffindors to the Great Hall. "Can't we at least take a break after lunch?" Ron pleaded.

"You can take a break," Hermione acquiesced. "I'll be doing research in the library."

That statement caught Harry's attention. It was unlike Hermione to concede so quickly, and it was practically unheard of for her not to encourage others to join her. Harry had a sneaking suspicion that her research had nothing to do with her studies.

"But Hermione," Ron grumbled. "Don't you think it might be more fun if we both took a break...together?" The last was said in barely more than a whisper, but the word carried to Harry's ears nonetheless. He had to suppress a shudder down his spine at the thought of exactly what Ron was suggesting. He was glad that they had finally come to their senses and gotten together, but the thought of them actually being together like that was more than a little disturbing.

"Maybe you should concentrate on finishing all your studies before Sunday evening then," Hermione briskly remarked as they finally made their way into the Great Hall.

As they approached the Gryffindor table, Ginny squeezed his hand causing him to pause. "I promised my friends I'd sit with them at lunch today," she told him.

Harry nodded his head. "Do you want me to come?"

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and held it between her teeth for a moment before looking up into his eyes and shaking her head. "Nah, that's all right. You go sit with your friends."

With that, she stood on her toes and leaned in to give him a lingering kiss. He could practically feel her relief at having him back safely inside the castle. As she began to pull back, Harry began to lean forward, trailing after her lips, before catching himself, grasping that the Great Hall was not the best place to snog your girlfriend. Harry smiled warmly as she squeezed his hand one last time and left to sit with her friends. He watched her progress for a moment before turning and following after his friends who were already seated further down the table. As Harry approached, he found that Ron was already halfway finished with his first plate of food while Hermione and Neville both appeared to be just starting on theirs.

Hermione looked up at him as he sat down across from her, and she placed her fork back on the table as she asked, "So, Harry, what was it you were studying when you fell asleep in your office."

"Potions," Harry responded as he began filling up his plate.

"Oh?" Hermione responded, curiosity evident in her tone. "Have you selected a potion yet?"

"S'lect'd a posh'n f'r whuh?" Ron attempted around a mouth full of food.

"Honestly, Ron!" Hermione rebuked, none too gently. "That's disgusting!"

"I think what he was trying to ask was, what are you selecting a potion for?" Neville input.

Ron nodded and, after swallowing his mouth full of food, exclaimed, "That's what I said."

Wanting to head off Hermione's retort, Harry answered, "Snape is having us pick out a potion for an independent study project. We're

not actually going to brew them, I don't think - just do a report on them."

"I think I'm going to do Skelegrow," Hermione inserted. "But I can't decide. There are just so many interesting potions to choose from."

"I was thinking about doing Wolfsbane," Harry stated, answering her earlier question.

Hermione's eyes locked onto his at that. "For Professor Lupin?" she asked softly.

He nodded his head.

"That's very thoughtful of you, Harry," Hermione stated.

"But you said you weren't actually brewing the potions," Ron interjected. "So how will that help?"

Harry shook his head at his friend, but before he could respond, Hermione jumped in, "How can you be so insensitive? It's the thought that counts."

"Or maybe," Neville piped up, "he plans to learn how to brew it on his own, regardless of whether or not they cover it in class."

Hermione's eyes widened considerably at his insight, and Harry just shrugged his shoulders. "I have considered it, but I want to see just what I'd be getting myself into before I make any decisions."

"I've read that it's an extremely difficult potion to brew," Hermione explained.

"Mental," Ron whispered. "Why would you want to learn it if you don't have to?"

The question seemed to be addressed more to himself than to anyone else, but that did not stop Hermione from pouncing. "Just because you can't imagine why anyone would do more than the bare

minimum required to get through life, doesn't mean everyone else is the same. Did you ever think that maybe Harry wants to be able to help Professor Lupin in case he can't get the potion from somewhere else?"

That was exactly why Harry had chosen that potion, of course. He knew how difficult it was supposed to be to brew, and he knew that not many in the world would bother going through the trouble to help what they considered to be half-breeds. Should Snape ever become unwilling or unable to continue to brew the potion, Harry wanted to make sure Remus had other options. Harry would always be willing to help in his Animagus form, but he hoped to be able to provide Remus with a source of Wolfsbane as well.

Ron appeared to be sufficiently cowed by Hermione's outburst and apologised sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it, mate," Harry replied. "To be honest, I'm not all that excited at the prospect of attempting it; I just want to make sure Remus always has a source available to him in case something should happen to Snape."

"You mean in case Snape decides to stop making it for him?" Ron asked darkly.

"That too, mate," Harry replied. "That too."

The next day, the morning delivery of the Daily Prophet brought with it news of the attack in Diagon Alley. Harry had spent the previous afternoon and evening wondering at the fate of Ollivander. The situation was so hectic and he had been in such a hurry to get back to Hogwarts that Harry forgot to check on the old wandmaker prior to returning to the castle. He did not have his own subscription to the rag of a newspaper, so he had to listen to Hermione's comments with the rest of them and wait until she finished reading the article before digging into it himself.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the article did not contain a list of victims and mentioned nothing about Ollivander. Harry silently cursed

himself for his forgetfulness. He knew he would get nothing out of the headmaster, regardless of the fact that it was Harry's information that warned them of the attack in the first place. Instead, he found himself wishing the full moon would get here quicker so that he could ask Remus. He abruptly felt guilty at that, realising that Remus would not appreciate suffering the effects of a full moon any sooner than he had to. His curiosity was unabated, but he resigned himself to the wait – just over a week now.

Luckily, he had other things to occupy his mind in the meantime, most notably the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend. Early in the week he made sure to give Neville the money he had promised him. Harry made sure to wish him luck in his shopping excursion. He did not envy Neville his position searching for a suitable gift. Harry was glad he had several months before he had to do the same.

The down side to the weekend trip was that it made the week seem to drag on at an excruciatingly slow pace. To make matters worse, Harry's sleep was interrupted three times by visions that week as Voldemort appeared to have retaken an interest in participating in the Death Eaters' seemingly random attacks. By Friday he was definitely feeling the effects from the lack of sleep, and he was greatly looking forward to the break that the Hogsmeade trip provided.

Luck was not with him, for his sleep was yet again disrupted that night. Tired as he was, he tried to block out the images and go back to sleep, but there was no use. The vision was too fresh, and even his Occlumency was not enough to keep the images from flashing in his mind whenever his eyes closed. Giving it up as a bad job, Harry forced himself up and out of bed. Throwing on his workout clothes and grabbing one of his books on wards, Harry headed down to the common room to wait for Ginny.

The wait was excruciating. As he read, he could not help his eyes drooping. However, every time he seemed to nod off, an image from his vision would flash in his mind, and he would jerk back into awareness. After what must have been a dozen times, Harry jumped to his feet and threw the book down at the armchair in frustration. After pacing for a minute, Harry sighed. There was nothing for it. He picked the book back up and took it over to one of the tables. He

settled himself on one of the straight-backed wooden chairs and opened the book. He decided it was best to reread what he had already done that morning as he could hardly remember any of it.

His eyes were still threatening to droop, but he was able to keep himself awake in the uncomfortable chair. Finally, as the sun began creeping up in the horizon, Ginny entered the common room. She quietly padded over to where he was sitting and plopped down into a chair beside him.

“Again?” she asked.

He did not need any clarification. He just nodded. She reached her hand out and squeezed his thigh just above his knee. “Well, we should get going,” Harry stated abruptly, closing his book and standing.

Ginny grabbed his hand and tugged him back before he could walk away. “Are you sure, Harry?” He could hear the worry in her voice quite clearly. “You should try to get some more rest.”

Harry just shook his head. “I already tried that, and besides, we’ve got our training to do. Can’t give it up every time I have a bad dream, can I?” Before Ginny could reply, and he was sure she wanted to, Harry tugged her hand to get her standing. Planting a kiss on her cheek, he continued, “Let’s go.”

She allowed herself to be led out of the common room, though Harry was well aware of her reluctance. Once they had completed their stretches, Harry set into his jog. The exercise served to wake him up a bit, but even with his blood pumping through his body, he could feel the fatigue lingering. He knew that if the visions kept up, he could not continue on at this pace. He resolved to look into some possible solutions to his problem, but he shoved the matter out of his mind for the moment. After their workout, they had a nice weekend to spend in Hogsmeade, and he was determined not to let the visions or his lack of sleep spoil the mood.

Though they were as early as usual for breakfast, Harry and Ginny arrived in the Great Hall to find that they were not among the first

students there. There were scattered students at each of the tables, not much more than a handful of students at each table, but they were accustomed to being the first in the hall over the weekends. Apparently, the students were eager to get to the village.

Not long after they had sat down, Neville came into the hall alone and sat opposite them. "Good morning, Neville," Ginny greeted while Harry simply nodded at the boy.

"Morning," Neville responded hurriedly as he tucked a couple pieces of toast in a napkin. "See you guys in town?"

"Yeah," Harry responded as Ginny nodded. "Later, Neville."

He just raised his wand in a wave as he hurried back out of the hall, already beginning on his first slice of toast.

"Wonder what that was all about," Ginny whispered at his side, her eyes following his retreating form.

"Hannah's got a birthday coming up," Harry explained. "He's planning on shopping for her present."

"He told you that?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, he needed to borrow some money," Harry answered.

"Oh," she said, then turned and tucked back into her breakfast.

Harry did likewise. When there were only eggs left on his plate, Harry switched the fork to his left hand and, with his right, reached under the table to rest his hand on her leg just above her knee. She looked over at him and smirked, but Harry just kept on eating. Swallowing the last bite, Harry washed it down with a drag of pumpkin juice. Ginny had finished a few minutes prior. Her attention had wandered to the other occupants of the room, so he squeezed her leg to get her to turn back around and asked, "Do you want to head into town now or wait?"

She shrugged. "Might as well head out now."

The sun was much higher in the sky now than it had been during their morning run, and the air was noticeably warmer. With hardly a cloud in the sky, it was a beautiful day for a trip to Hogsmeade. They walked mostly in comfortable silence. Neither one of them had much planned for the trek. Harry wanted to stock up on some essentials like quills, ink, and parchment, and Ginny needed to look for a school robe to replace one of her more worn robes, but beyond that, neither of them really had an agenda for the day. They finished those tasks quickly, so they were content to just enjoy the time together outdoors in the nice weather.

That is until they noticed Neville looking rather harried as he rushed from shop to shop in search of the elusive perfect gift. Looking at each other, Ginny asked the question they were both thinking, "Should we see if he wants help?"

"Doesn't hurt to ask," Harry replied thoughtfully. "He may want to do it on his own, but if so, he'll just say no. And at least we'll have offered."

Ginny nodded her agreement, and the two followed Neville into Chaundry's Charmed Charms. As they entered the store, they found display cases showing off various pieces of jewellery and other trinkets. Neville was walking by each display case much too quickly to really take stock of the contents. He seemed to be in such a hurry to find the right gift that he was likely to completely pass it by if he ever came across it.

"Hey Neville," Harry called, drawing the boy out of his focus.

He looked confusedly at them, and Ginny asked, "How's the shopping going?"

"Oh, all right I guess," he responded distractedly, as he glanced back at the cases. "I need to hurry though. I promised Hannah I'd meet her for lunch at the Three Broomsticks and that I'd spend the rest of the day with her."

“You want some help?” Ginny offered.

Harry could see the conflict written plainly on Neville’s face. Neville opened his mouth to respond, then shut it abruptly and shook his head. After another moment, he smiled slightly, almost embarrassedly, and said, “Yes, actually, some help would be great. I’m in way over my head here.”

Harry could only smile as Ginny immediately started firing questions and walking with him along the displays. Harry trailed behind, only half paying attention to the conversation as he glanced at the various items on display. He was actually surprised when only a half hour later they were walking out of the store with a very relieved Neville holding a bag with his purchase. They had found a nice bracelet that Ginny assured him Hannah would love.

“Do you want to walk around with us until lunch?” Ginny asked as they stood outside the shop.

“No, you two go ahead,” Neville insisted. “I feel bad enough for tying you up already.”

“It’s no trouble mate,” Harry replied.

Ginny gave him a nudge with her elbow as she scoffed, “You didn’t even do anything. But really Neville, I was happy to help.”

“Thanks,” Neville said, looking from Ginny to Harry then back again. “Maybe I’ll see you in the Three Broomsticks for lunch?”

“Sure thing,” Harry responded after Ginny had nodded. “We’ll see you then.”

They just window shopped for the hour to pass the time to noon. Along the way they had run into Ron and Hermione and informed the couple of their plans for lunch. Something seemed a bit off with the two of them, but they agreed to meet them for lunch as well. While working their way towards the pub, they saw Luna and asked her to

join them as well, but she politely declined. She was on the hunt, it would seem, for the elusive Round-Tailed Lorvens infesting the town. Deciding it best not to ask questions, they wished her luck and continued on their way. When they entered the pub, they noticed Neville right away and walked over to him. When he informed Neville that Ron and Hermione would be joining them as well, they took one of the larger round tables. Apparently Hannah had told Neville that Susan and Justin would be eating with them as well.

It was not long before the table was full. By that time the entire pub was filled to the brim, and they had to practically yell to be heard across the table. Harry was grateful when the food arrived. The weariness had been creeping up on him as the morning dragged on, and the food gave him a boost in energy. They ended up staying at the pub for over two hours, just talking and laughing and enjoying themselves and the company. When they did leave, rather than split up, the group decided to wander the town together.

Harry was glad for the company. The boisterous atmosphere helped him forget about the visions, the war, and all the pressures he felt squarely on his shoulders. For just an afternoon, he was a normal sixteen year old boy with a good group of friends and an even better girlfriend. They entered a few shops but mostly just walked around joking and laughing with each other until the time finally came to head back to the castle for supper.

Harry went to bed even earlier than usual that night. Ginny practically insisted on it, but he did not disagree with her. He knew he needed the extra rest now that Voldemort was becoming more active. As a result, he was able to get an extra hour or so of sleep before he was awoken by another vision that night. It was not much, but he was thankful for every minute of restful sleep that he got these days.

His morning and afternoon were consumed in his two double HA classes. Following the IHA class, he found himself disappointed. They had been doing the life-like duels for about a month now, and there was little improvement to be seen. They knew their spell-work well enough, but more often than not things rapidly deteriorated into an open firefight. Seeing as it was just a friendly duel, nobody

seemed to be keeping self-preservation in mind. He would have to do something about that; he just was not yet sure what.

Harry suffered another vision that night, but his restlessness the next day masked any fatigue. That night was a full moon, and he was quite desperate for the chance to talk with Remus. Not only did he want to know what happened with Ollivander, he was also dying to find out if Remus was having any luck searching for his new house.

When the evening arrived, and they snuck out of the castle, Harry could barely keep himself from running through the tunnel leading to the Shrieking Shack. It was only Ginny's presence behind him that kept him from quickening his pace. Finally, they arrived at the trap door, and Harry quickly climbed out, turning back to give Ginny a hand up as well. He immediately spotted Remus, who was already seated in an armchair. Across him was a loveseat, and in-between the two pieces of furniture was a table. On the table was a folder.

After a quick greeting, Harry wasted little time taking a seat beside Ginny and lifting up the folder. "What's this?" he asked, though he had a pretty good idea already.

"Just some information and pictures," Remus replied with a small smile.

"Of houses?" Harry asked even as he opened the folder and answered his own question.

"Yes," Remus answered unnecessarily.

Harry was already leafing through the pages, and he noticed Ginny leaning over his shoulder to get a look. He sat back and held the folder in-between their bodies to give her a better view.

"I ordered them by what I thought you'd like," Remus remarked after a minute. "The two on the bottom are in London; the first three are all in suburbs. I tried to pick places with parks nearby since I know you still run every morning. I thought it might be a little more enjoyable than running on the streets."

“Thanks, Remus,” Harry replied, looking up from the folder. “It really means a lot to me that you found all this for me and that you’re okay with all of this.”

Remus grimaced slightly at that. “Well, to be honest I’m still not entirely comfortable with the idea. I’m going to have a lot of people to answer to when they learn I was not only aware of your plans but helped you, but I do understand where you’re coming from. And honestly, someone should have stepped in and taken you away from the Dursleys a long time ago regardless of the protection their home provides.”

Harry just smiled as he turned back to the folder.

“Go back to the first one,” Ginny said quietly.

Harry flipped back, and, as Ginny took the folder from his hands to look at something, Harry looked up at Remus. “I meant to ask you, what happened with Ollivander during the attack? I didn’t stick around long enough to find out, and he hasn’t been in the news from what I’ve seen.”

“He’s safe,” Remus told him. “He was injured in the fight and taken to St Mungo’s, but he’s already recovered.”

“Hmm.” Harry mused over that news. Now that he thought about it, he was surprised that Voldemort had not alerted him to that particular failure. Normally Harry was pulled into a vision any time his Death Eaters botched a mission.

“What are you thinking?” Remus queried.

“Well, it’s just that, when I had the vision, I felt like Voldemort was hiding something as he gave the orders to kidnap Ollivander,” Harry explained. “Normally when the Death Eaters fail at something, I’m given a front row view of their punishment. I’m just wondering if the whole thing was just a setup.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Remus stated. “You haven’t had any visions since then?”

It was Harry’s turn to grimace. “I’ve had a few,” he admitted. “But they didn’t have anything to do with Diagon Alley.” When Remus furrowed his brow, Harry reluctantly added, “He’s been participating in attacks again. It hasn’t exactly been pleasant.” Ginny reached over and squeezed his hand in sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” Remus said.

Harry shrugged. “Some things can’t be avoided.” Turning to Ginny, he asked, “So what do you think?”

At her questioning look, he nodded to the folder still in her hand. “Oh,” she said. “Well, I don’t know. They’re all nice, but I think I like the first one best.”

Holding his hand out to her, he scanned through all the options again. Truth be told, he did not really care all that much and had no real preferences. He just wanted to get away from the Dursleys and out from Dumbledore’s thumb. And he wanted a place he could call his own – his home. He had never given any thought to any details.

“Me too,” he stated after a few minutes. “I like the first one.” He placed the folder back on the table and turned to Remus. “So what do we need to do from here?”

Remus looked like he was about to answer when his body seemed to tense up. “We’ll have to finish this later,” he ground out. “You guys better transform.”

They both quickly scrambled to their feet and transformed into a pair of felines. They wrestled around for a little bit, but after he yawned one too many times, Ginny stopped and turned to him, gesturing to him to lie down. He thought about ignoring her but decided against it. Truth be told, he was exhausted, and his sleep was due to be interrupted anyway. Ginny stood over him as he began to curl up to go to sleep. Only after his eyes closed did he feel her curl up beside

him, laying a paw over his. He tried to open his eyes to get one last look at her, but sleep was already beginning to claim him. His eyes barely opened before fluttering closed again. The last thing he saw was Ginny's feline eyes watching over him before sleep claimed him.

OoOoO

Remus paced around the shack silently. He was having difficulty settling down. He always had trouble settling while in his werewolf form. It was better with the Wolfsbane since he was able to retain his mental faculties, and he was grateful he had taken the potion that evening. Still, there was always a sense of unease and anxiousness that prevented him from getting any rest. So while Harry and Ginny slept, he had little to occupy his time but his thoughts and his pacing.

He spied the sleeping felines out of the corner of his eye. Not for the first time, he wondered how he ever found himself in this situation. It was odd enough that James, Sirius, and Peter had gone through the trouble back in their Hogwarts days, but to have Harry and Ginny both do the same for him now made his heart swell – yet at the same time constrict. For the past fifteen years, the full moon had been a monthly reminder of all that he once had and all that he had lost. Harry and Ginny helped him more than he could ever explain to them, but at the same time, their presence reinforced the lost feeling he suffered whenever he thought of his friends. Of course, the feeling was much worse when he spent this time alone.

Turning to face the sleeping couple slowly, he could hardly help but smile. At least, he thought he was smiling. It was hard to tell how the gesture was reflected on the werewolf's face. He would never tell them – unless the opportunity for payback arose – but they were just so cute together in their animal forms. As mature as they normally acted, he was struck by just how young they were when they interacted as felines. They were playful when wrestling around and affectionate when settling down for the night. He felt almost privileged to get to see them interact like that. It showed a certain degree of trust and also displayed just how comfortable they were around him.

As he surveyed the couple, he could hear a faint growl coming from one of the sleeping felines. At first he paid it no mind, figuring one of

them was having a dream or something, but, as the sound grew louder, he noticed Harry start to twitch and jerk in his sleep. Carefully padding his way towards the panther, he grew concerned. Something was not right, that was for sure. He had never seen Harry get like this. Perhaps he was having a nightmare – or a vision.

Taking care to be cautious, he leaned forward and nudged the back of Harry's neck with his snout. Harry jerked in his sleep but did not wake. His movement caused Ginny to shift. Remus watched as her eyes blearily opened and her mouth stretched open in a wide yawn. Her eyes darted around for a moment before she seemed to realise where she was. She caught his eyes and held them for a moment before Harry growled and shifted again.

Her focus shifted to the panther at her side. She rubbed her face against his, but he still would not wake. From what he knew of Harry's visions there was not anything that could wake Harry until it was over, so he resigned himself to the wait. Ginny seemed to be of a similar mind. She gave him a lick across what would have been his cheek and settled down in front of Harry, her eyes never leaving his face.

As time went by, Harry's growls grew more pronounced, and he jerked around a little more forcefully. Finally, after what seemed like hours, he jerked fully upright and was awake. Ginny did not hesitate to jump up with him. His black furred head whipped towards the movement, and Remus could swear he heard someone shout, Ginny!

Remus turned his head left and right, but they were alone in the room. Ginny moved forward, though she gave no indication that she had heard anything. Harry just stood still, but as Ginny rubbed her face against his, he leaned into the contact. As she comforted Harry, Remus was left to ponder his thoughts. Had he perhaps imagined it? He averted his eyes, not wanting to intrude on a private moment between the two. After a moment, he heard a sigh, followed by, Sodding Voldemort.

Well, he did not imagine that. There was something strange about it though. He was hearing it, in a sense, but at the same time, the room was quiet. He was fairly certain the words had not been spoken aloud. Was he somehow reading Harry's thoughts? But no, that did not

make sense. He was certain he would have heard more than three words by now if he was hearing Harry's thoughts. He wished he could talk to Harry right now and ask him if he had any idea what was going on – not that he expected him too, but Harry did have a lot of surprises up his sleeve. The ability to speak with his mind would not have been too farfetched.

Figuring it could not hurt to try – no one would even have to know – he tried to talk to Harry. His first few attempts did not appear to have any effect. He focused all his concentration and gave it one last shot. Hello? Harry? Remus jumped back when Harry immediately spun around to stare at him. Harry's eyes bore into his, and Remus tentatively asked, Can you hear me?

Yes, the replay came to him. You can hear me?

Uh, yes, Remus responded. You called out to Ginny earlier and then said 'Sodding Voldemort.'

Huh, I hadn't meant to mindspeak. I guess it's just a natural reaction when I can't use my mouth, Harry mused.

Mindspeak? Remus questioned.

That's what I've taken to calling it. Apparently all magical animals can do it to some extent, Harry explained. I suppose werewolves count in that respect. As Remus took a moment to process this information, Harry added, As do magical owls.

Owls? Remus queried. You mean you can talk in your owl form? To other owls?

That's when I discovered the ability, Harry began, but he was interrupted when Ginny nudged his side. Damn, I don't know how to explain to her that I can talk to you.

Take her into another room and transform, Remus suggested. I'll wait here for you.

Okay.

OoOoO

Harry turned to Ginny and with his head motioned her to follow as he led her into another room. He nudged the door shut behind him and, after hearing it bang shut, transformed back into human form. Ginny immediately did likewise.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” Ginny asked, her concern evident.

“I’m fine,” Harry stated. “Or as fine as can be given the circumstances,” he amended.

“Vision?”

Harry nodded. “As for what’s going on, it turns out that werewolves are capable of mindspeak.”

“Mindspeak?” she asked. “Oh, you mean like how you can talk to owls?”

“And other magical animals, yes,” Harry answered. “I mind-spoke, I guess, without realising it, and Remus heard me and managed to answer.”

“So you and Remus can talk to each other when he’s stuck as a werewolf,” she stated. Harry thought she was stating it more for her own benefit than his.

“Yeah, it appears that way,” Harry replied. “I think maybe I’ll stay up a little while and hopefully work out some more details for the house.”

“Are you sure?” Ginny asked. “You haven’t been sleeping well lately; you should try to get back to sleep.”

“I don’t think that will be an option,” Harry stated. “I can never sleep just after a vision, and I have tried.”

Ginny held up her hands. "Okay, okay. I just worry about you."

"I know," he said softly. He reached out and pulled her into his embrace, pressing his lips briefly to the top of her head.

"Do you want me to stay up with you and keep you company?" she asked, her words muffled by his chest.

Harry shook his head. "You should go to sleep," he said. "Just because I can't sleep doesn't mean you should suffer." He stepped back and could see her conflict written on her face. "I'll lie down with you, but you won't be able to hear us, so just let yourself fall to sleep. I promise I'll follow as soon as I'm able." He doubted he would get any more sleep that night, but he thought it best to withhold that fact. Ginny's doubtful face told him that she saw through his words, but she nodded anyway.

"Okay, Harry."

He smiled warmly and reached out to cup her cheek. Leaning down, he captured her lips in his for a brief kiss. "Good night, Gin."

"Night, Harry," she replied softly.

They both transformed back into their feline forms, only for Harry to discover that the door was shut and that manipulating the doorknob with paws was a rather tricky prospect. He reverted back to human form and, sending a sheepish grin at the still-feline Ginny, opened the door a crack. He immediately transformed back into a panther and nudged the door open the rest of the way with his paw. As he ambled into the room, he noticed Remus pacing back and forth across the wood floor.

I let her know about my vision and how we can talk, Harry explained. She's going back to sleep now.

Remus did not reply, just watched as they settled back down. As promised, he lay down beside Ginny, but rather than closing his eyes in an attempt to sleep, he faced Remus. He glanced back to make

sure that Ginny had closed her eyes, which she had not. They stared into each others' eyes for a moment when Ginny yawned. Afterwards, her eyes drifted shut, and Harry turned back to the werewolf. So where were we? Harry asked.

I believe you were just about to tell me about your ability to speak to owls, Remus answered.

Oh, right. Well, I found out about that over the summer, Harry explained. I thought it might be fun to show Hedwig my owl Animagus form. When I changed into an owl, I heard a voice inside my head. I think she was asking if it was me. I learned quickly enough after that, and I was eventually able to manage it even outside of my owl form.

That's a handy ability, Remus remarked.

Even more so than I thought it'd be, Harry inserted. You might be surprised how much owls pick up on. You remember that night I crashed your party at Amelia Bones' house? Without waiting for a reply, Harry continued. I found out about the attack from an owl. It showed up in the Great Hall to deliver a letter to Dumbledore, so I knew something was up, and I managed to convince it to tell me.

That's incredible, Remus responded.

Yeah, but enough about owls, Harry stated. I was hoping we could talk more about the house. I want to move forward as quickly as possible.

They spent the rest of the evening talking. Remus informed him that the couple who currently owned the house had already moved out, so hopefully there would not be any problems trying to speed up the process a little bit. If all went well, he may be able to close on the house by the next full moon, which would give Harry more than enough time to get all his wards in place. After that topic was exhausted, they talked some more about the battle at Diagon Alley and the war in general. Remus informed him that several Order members had in fact noticed a black owl flying around the alley prior to the battle. While none of them could confirm that the owl was an

Animagus, it was pretty much assumed that it was either Jim or his twin scoping out the Alley.

Remus asked him how school was going, so Harry briefly touched on his classes before delving into what he was doing with the HA. That led into his private lessons with Ginny. Harry confessed to Remus his worry about her participating in the war. While in his head he knew it was her choice and that he could only prepare her and make sure she was able to handle it, another part of him wanted to keep her locked up in the castle safe from harm. Remus could certainly commiserate with Tonks being such an active member of the Order on top of being an Auror. In the end, he just had to trust that she could take care of herself.

Harry was almost surprised when morning came and Remus reverted back into human form. He was panting rather heavily as the transformation passed, and Harry could not suppress the sympathy he felt for the man. It was not fair that he had to go through the painful transformation every month. He wished there was something he could do about it, but he knew there was not. Shaking his head, he turned to Ginny. She was purring lightly in sleep, making Harry smile – or as much of a smile as a panther can manage. He licked her cheek a couple times before she woke up. They changed back into human form moments later, and Ginny immediately commented, “You didn’t sleep at all, did you?”

Harry could only shrug his shoulders. She did not press him on it; she simply reached forward and pulled him into a hug, which he gladly returned. He inhaled deeply with his nose in her hair, savouring the scent. As he withdrew, he turned back to Remus to find the man watching them with a weary but fond smile. “You should get back to the castle,” he said, his voice gruff.

Harry nodded. “See you soon, Remus.”

“Hopefully not too soon,” Remus replied. “Goodbye Harry, Ginny.”

Ginny echoed his goodbye, and Harry led her down into the tunnel that would lead them back to Hogwarts. They snuck back into the castle and into Harry’s office together. Harry had been planning on

showering and getting ready for the day, but Ginny would hear nothing of it.

“No, Harry,” she insisted. “You barely slept a wink last night, and I don’t think you got a full night’s sleep all last week.”

“I did too,” Harry interrupted, feeling slightly indignant. It was not as if he did not want to sleep; he just could not manage it after a vision. Ginny just glared at him, arching one of her eyebrows at his response. After a long moment spent under her scrutiny he rather meekly added, “Once.”

“That’s what I thought. Bed. Now!”

“This is pointless,” Harry refused. “I can’t sleep. I’ve tried it, but I just end up lying there thinking about what happened. I wish I could just sleep; I honestly do.”

Ginny’s glare softened, and she stepped up to him, grasping one of his hands in both of hers. “What if I lie down with you?” she asked softly.

Harry shrugged. He honestly did not see how that would help, but at least he would not just be lying in bed staring at the ceiling. “Okay,” he agreed. Under different circumstances, he would be thrilled at sharing a bed with Ginny, and a part of him still was even knowing that nothing would be happening. But still, even if all they did was just lie together for a couple hours, it would be time well spent in his opinion.

They took turns changing in the loo. Ginny had taken to storing a few outfits, including a nightdress, in Harry’s trunk. They normally ended up crashing inside his trunk after a full moon and skipping their normal morning routine, so it made sense to have the clothes handy. Dressed in only his boxers and a t-shirt, Harry crawled into the bed beside Ginny. They were lying face to face under the covers, and Harry was unsure what to do. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. Her lips were soft and inviting. After a moment, he moved his hand to her elbow and up her arm. As he moved his arm to her back, he tried to close the distance between them, but Ginny ended the kiss abruptly, pulling back and breathing just a little harshly. "Don't think you can fool me," she reprimanded. "You're supposed to be sleeping, Potter."

"Right," he stated under his breath, but given their proximity he knew she heard it.

"Turn around," she commanded.

Harry met her eyes for a moment and considered resisting but thought better of it. When she was this determined about something there was no point. So he turned around and faced away from her. He was slightly surprised when he felt her slide up against his back. She reached her right arm over his side, and he grabbed her hand in his, hugging it to his chest. He turned his head slightly to look over his shoulder to find her looking down on him with a fond smile. She was leaning on her other elbow. "Close your eyes," she whispered. "I'll watch over you."

He felt a little silly to hear her say that, but at the same time, he could not help the rush of warmth he felt at the statement. He had never had someone to watch over him. For as long as he could remember he was taking care of himself. If it was anyone else, he knew he would be angry that they felt the need to hover over him as if he could not take care of himself, but he knew that was not the case with Ginny. The image of his new Patronus form popped into his head, the silvery lioness modelled after Ginny's Animagus form. He smiled up at her, then raised her hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles. He opened his mouth to tell her about his Patronus, but before he could even utter a sound, her finger pressed into his lips.

"Shh," she softly shushed. "Go to sleep, Harry."

He gave up and turned his head back to the wall, hugging her hand back to his chest and allowing his eyes to close. He felt her begin to

lightly play with his hair with her other hand, and he found it so soothing. He took a deep breath, relishing in the treatment. Before he knew it, he was drifting off into a deep, relaxing sleep.

Chapter 24: The Stakes

You know the words.

Indeed he did. Tapping the parchment, he uttered, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." He had received the letter with that simple sentence on it that morning. Remus had warned him that his correspondence would be charmed. He wished the man would have come up with a less-known password, but there was no harm done. The single sentence dissolved into the parchment, and the real letter slowly formed before his eyes.

Harry,

They accepted the offer. As we discussed, you won't be able to purchase the house in your name due to your status as a minor, never mind the fact that it would point out your location to anyone who took the time to look. I made a trip to Gringotts on your behalf and learned that they have private solicitors who should be able to assist in the process. You will need to meet with the goblins to approve everything in person.

I have arranged an appointment for you. I opted for a late-night meeting so that your prolonged absence will not be noticed. Meet me in the lobby on May 6th at 1:00am. Make sure to hide your identity – but don't come as Jim! We don't want to draw any attention to him either. I'll give you the rest of the details then.

RJL

Harry smiled widely. He was so close now. He committed the letter to memory and, not taking any chances, tossed the parchment into the fire. He watched as the flames consumed it, blackening the paper until nothing was left but ash. He walked over to the painting hanging on the wall of his office and repeated the Marauder password. The Gryffindor common room faded from view to be replaced by the map of Hogwarts. Touching his finger to the map, he stated, "Find Ginny Weasley."

His eyes immediately locked on the now bright red words proclaiming a particular pair of footsteps as belonging to his girlfriend. He smiled, pleased. He had added that feature to the map just yesterday. It made searching for her much easier, even if he did not typically have any difficulty finding her. Ginny was in the library surrounded by many of her year mates presumably studying. He would wait to tell her the news later. There was just about a week before the meeting, so there was no rush.

He cleared the map and walked around his desk. Sitting down, he surveyed the parchment in front of him. Learning how to cast the wards was the easy part – not that the spellwork was altogether simple. The truly difficult part was determining how to tie all the necessary wards together. For every ward added to the mix, the configuration became increasingly complex. It was possible to cast each of the wards individually, but doing so severely weakened them.

To guarantee a strong set of wards, each one had to be tied into a central Control Ward. The wards were tied into that Control using runes. Depending on the complexity of the ward, it could take one, two, or even three runes to tie that ward into the Control, and each rune tied into the control had to then be connected to every other rune tied to that Control. Harry wished he had studied Ancient Runes rather than Divination. He knew nothing about runes, so his progress was slow. He had to look everything up and was unable to do even the most basic rune combinations without walking through the books he had collected from the library.

Harry was intent on using the Control Ward. All his reading on the subject had insisted that the benefits were monumental. Any time you were casting permanent wards, you should be using a Control Ward. The only time it specifically recommended against it was for temporary wards, like the kind Harry used whenever he trained in the Room or Requirement. Using a Control greatly decreased the upkeep of the wards. Rather than having to reinforce each ward individually, you need only reinforce the Control Ward, and in order to break through the wards, you had to first break the Control, which was much more difficult than breaking any of the wards individually. Only after that Control Ward was broken could you attack the rest of the wards.

The only exception – and the only one not being tied into the Control Ward – was the Fidelius Charm. It was fundamentally different from the other wards as it was tied directly into the magic of the Secret-Keeper. The charm reinforced itself through its link to the Secret-Keeper, making any additional upkeep unnecessary. Fortunately, it took small amounts of magic over a long period of time, so there was no noticeable strain on the Secret-Keeper.

Short of convincing the Secret-Keeper to reveal the secret, there was only one confirmed method of breaking the charm. Since the Fidelius Charm gained its power from the Secret-Keeper, killing the Secret-Keeper would, over time, cause the charm to weaken and eventually break, but it was not a quick process. Since only the Secret-Keeper could reveal the location, killing him was essentially dooming yourself to wait for the charm to break on its own, and depending on varying circumstances, that could take months or years.

The author went on to state that it had been hypothesized that there might be another way to break the Fidelius Charm without killing the Secret-Keeper. The book mentioned that it might be possible to sever the link between the charm and the Secret-Keeper, but this possibility was unconfirmed. Further, it was unknown what would happen in that scenario. The author postulated what he felt were the two most likely outcomes. One was that, after severing the link, it might be possible to reestablish the link in another person, essentially transferring the Secret-Keeper responsibilities to another individual. If the link was unable to be transferred, or if the transfer simply was not performed, the charm would most likely deteriorate over time, much like in the case of the death of the Secret-Keeper.

Harry intended to be his own Secret-Keeper. He trusted both Ginny and Remus, but he had no intention of placing such a burden on either of them. He would tell both of them the secret, of course, but he alone would be able to divulge it. He could not help but wonder why one of his parents had not chosen to be their Secret-Keeper after going into hiding. There was no sense in dwelling on it, however, so Harry did his best to put the matter out of his mind.

Harry jumped as a loud knock echoed in the office. He quickly shuffled the parchment and books on his desk together and stuffed them into a desk drawer, then pulled out and opened *Keeping the Beast at Bay: A Guide to the Wolfsbane Potion*. Using his wand, he popped the door open and called, "Come in."

Hermione's head poked through the doorway, followed shortly by the rest of her body. "Hi Harry," she greeted.

"Hey," he replied. "What's up?"

"Oh, not too much," she replied somewhat distractedly. "I was just doing research and decided to take a break and stretch my legs a bit, so I thought I'd see if you were around."

Harry barely resisted the urge to smirk. Hermione taking a break from studying was akin to Voldemort taking a break from being an evil dark lord.

"What are you reading?" Hermione asked after a moment.

Harry held up the book for her to read the cover. "Doing research for Potions," he told her. "Did you ever decide which one you were going to study?"

"No," she stated. "I narrowed it down to two but couldn't decide, so I've been researching them both."

Now that sounded more like the Hermione he knew. "You do realise that Snape won't accept two different reports from you, right?"

"Of course I do," she replied. "I'll make my decision after I've done a bit more research."

"So which two is it?" Harry asked conversationally.

"Skele-Gro and Mandrake Draught," she answered.

"Why those two?"

Shrugging, she replied, "I've been curious about them both ever since second year."

He should have known. He was about to ask about the research, but Hermione beat him to the punch.

"I noticed you received a letter at breakfast this morning," she mentioned, her voice sounding casual.

Harry did not reply verbally, only raised an eyebrow at her.

After a moment, she continued. "Who was it from?"

"Remus," he replied.

"Oh? How is Professor Lupin? What was he writing about?" she asked him.

Harry was ready for that one. Part of him wanted to tell her to bugger off and mind her own business, but he realised that he would only be antagonising her. It was much easier to simply give her an answer she could readily swallow. "He's doing well. I asked him about the Wolfsbane Potion, but he couldn't really tell me much. He doesn't know much about the potion itself, only the effects it has on his transformation, and I highly doubt Snape cares much about that."

"Oh," she sounded disappointed. "That's too bad."

"Yeah, I figured it was worth a shot," Harry responded with a shrug. "Well, I should probably get back to my research."

"Right. Sorry for interrupting," Hermione said.

"It's no problem," Harry replied. "I'll see you at lunch?"

"Yes, see you then," Hermione called as she walked out the door.

As the door swung shut behind her, Harry reached out with his senses past the slight buzz of the walls to feel Hermione's magic. He traced her progress as she walked down the hall to make sure she was not about to attempt anything duplicitous. For the past week she had been busy in the library and had not, to his knowledge, resumed her stalking. After pocketing his post without opening it at breakfast that morning, Harry had noticed her giving him some not-so-surreptitious glances; he was fairly surprised that she chose to hold her tongue. He should have known better than to think she might let his unexplained correspondence slide.

Satisfied that she was not coming back, he closed the potions book and dug out his notes and books on wards. He had another hour or so to devote to the project before lunch, and he intended to make good use of that time. When the time came for lunch, Harry was disappointed when Ginny did not make an appearance. He knew she was busy, so he tried to put it out of mind and enjoy the meal with his friends.

Following lunch, Harry retreated to the Room of Requirement. Usually Ginny would accompany him, but she skived off, claiming that she had too much coursework to do. Remembering his O.W.L. classes last year, Harry could certainly understand how she was feeling overworked. It was bad enough without all the extra training. Once Harry entered the room, he cast the usual series of wards over the door and then turned to find three training dummies waiting for him.

Tying a blindfold over his eyes, Harry activated the dummies. The more he exercised this new ability, the more strength and control he gained over it. His sense of magic was beginning to become more sensitive. Whereas for the first couple weeks of training he had been blindly stumbling around waiting for a spell to be cast, now, when he concentrated hard enough, he could actually sense the location of his opponents. There was only a faint trace of magic present in the dummies, though, so it was not always easy to get a lock on them. It was nothing compared to the magic projected by a real person.

Ever since the discovery, he had improved leaps and bounds. The advantage was most profound when the fighting moved into close quarters. The dummies were almost silent in their movements, so,

any time they drew close to Harry, it was as if the spells had been materialising out of thin air from just a couple metres away. Now, when the dummies were near, he could sense them easily and, more often than not, attacked before they did. Even when the dummies attacked from a distance, once he ascertained their general location, it was much easier to then pinpoint the dummy and launch a counterattack.

Whereas a little over a week ago he had been using two relatively inept dummies, Harry now faced off against three competent opponents. They were nowhere near the level he used in his normal training, but he was thrilled with the improvement nonetheless. If only he could get that same level of improvement out of his students. Harry was still at a loss to how to proceed with his IHA class. They duelled relatively well given the lack of real-life experience, but that was not enough. He tried to drill into them the seriousness of these exercises and that they should treat this as a battle for their lives against Death Eaters, but nothing seemed to get through.

It was not that they did not take the battles seriously. They fought hard. It was more the style of fighting. There was no patience. They wanted to fight each other out in the open in a fair fight. There was never much of any strategy employed, and it more often than not made no difference to the outcome. If that was how they intended to fight against Death Eaters, they stood little chance of surviving the encounter.

Surprisingly, the same problem seemed not to affect the seven advanced students in his BHA class. He made it a point to pay a little more attention to their duels from now on, and it was clear that they took an entirely different attitude. No matter the teams, they would always put their heads together, come up with a plan, and they would work together towards their goals. Their duels very rarely deteriorated to the free-for-alls that plagued his IHA's mock battles. Try as he might, Harry could not figure out what he had done differently with these seven students to explain the disparity.

He shoved the matter out of his mind for the time being. No new ideas were forthcoming, and it was useless wasting his time when it could be better spent training. By the time he found himself under the

hot spray of his shower, Harry was utterly exhausted. There was no question about it, Voldemort was back to taking an active role in the war. Harry had no idea what had made the difference. Did he think he found the spy? Or was he just no longer allowing it to distract him? It was anybody's guess. Though Harry had visions nearly every night, none of them provided him any meaningful information. Voldemort's thoughts never even strayed to the spy, and Harry was never given any clues as to where or when the next attack would take place.

All Harry ever witnessed was torture – both for him and the victims of the attacks. The articles in the Daily Prophet the next morning always provided details of the attacks, but nothing in the articles could describe the absolute horror and brutality of them. As he watched his classmates cringe or blanch at what they read, he felt a bitter envy. How nice it would be to be in their shoes. Harry felt absolutely no emotion when reading the articles. His emotions were all spent in the middle of the night, fighting waves of nausea as the images assaulted his mind.

It was all beginning to weigh on him - both the trauma of the things he witnessed and the lack of sleep. He had been debating with himself all week. He still remembered McGonagall's offer made months ago, before Voldemort had become distracted with the spy, to come to her if he continued to have difficulties with the visions. Part of him rebelled at the idea of seeking her help. He was more than capable of looking after himself; he had proved that well enough since the summer. He had looked into some of his options already. Dreamless Sleep Potion would probably help him loads, but taking the potion with any regularity carried some dangerous side-effects. If he chose to go that route, he would need to be careful not to overdo it.

There were other sleeping potions, but none of them offered the same guarantees as the Dreamless Sleep Potion, and Harry feared what would happen if he was stuck in a dream state during the throws of a vision. Every time he had escaped a vision, he had awoken immediately. Would he be locked in the vision until the potion wore off? Or would he have to relive the images he had just witnessed over and over again in his dreams? Neither option was an attractive one, so he quickly vetoed the other sleeping potions.

Then there was the Invigoration Draught he had used the last time he had this problem, but he was already familiar with the dangers there. Even laying aside the addictive qualities, as soon as the potion wore off, he would be even more exhausted than he had been before taking the potion. His body needed sleep, and no amount of the potion could make up for that.

Finishing his shower, Harry dressed and made his way to the portrait of the Fat Lady. He gave her a distracted greeting as she opened for him sans password. He spotted Ron sitting in one of the armchairs in front of the fire and made his way over. Ron quickly enticed Harry into a game of chess before supper, and Harry spent the next twenty minutes arguing with his chess pieces over his moves while Ron systematically destroyed his arsenal and trapped his king. They did not have time for another game, so they spent the next few minutes chatting about Quidditch before the time came to head down to the Great Hall.

Harry was disappointed that Ginny had not yet returned from the library. He had not seen her since their morning workout, and he was rather hoping to at least see her at supper. Unfortunately, it was not to be. They made it down to the Great Hall, and Ginny was nowhere to be seen, nor did she appear at any time during the meal. When he was satisfyingly full, Harry decided to go make sure she at least at something. Bidding his friends goodbye, he headed up to the library.

He had no trouble spotting her; there were definite advantages to dating a redhead. She was seated at a table in a far corner of the room with several other fifth years. He briskly walked over to the table and approached directly behind Ginny. He gently laid his hands on her shoulders, squeezing slightly and bending down to kiss the top of her head. She tilted her head back to look up at him.

“Hey you,” she greeted warmly.

Harry smirked. “Hey.”

“Hi Harry,” another voice greeted, and Harry looked up to see the rest of the table staring at the two of them, wide grins on all their faces.

Harry felt a rush of heat flood his cheeks as he realised they had an audience. “Hello,” he replied, giving them a little wave. Two of the girls giggled lightly, and Harry rolled his eyes - both at himself and at the giggling girls. He was being silly and had practically asked for that response by acting all nervous.

Turning back down to Ginny, who was smiling at him with both her lips and eyes, he said, “You missed supper.” Her lips formed the shape of an ‘oh,’ though she made no sound. “And lunch,” Harry added.

“I guess I just lost track of the time,” she admitted sheepishly.

Harry looked at her patronisingly for a moment before surveying the others at her table. “Have any of you lot eaten since breakfast?” They all looked at each other and shrugged or shook their heads. Harry frowned. “All right. All of you up, now.” Glancing at the time, he saw that supper would be ending soon. “We’re taking a field trip to the kitchens.”

There was some grumbling of dissent, but when Jack Sloper’s stomach loudly growled, everyone laughed and followed Harry without complaint. Since he had just eaten, Harry spent most of the meal simply enjoying the company, particularly the beautiful girl at his side. He participated in some of the conversation but was content to just listen most of the time while rubbing circles with his thumb on Ginny’s back.

Harry did partake in dessert at the insistence of Dobby, who had made a treacle tart just for him. He did not have the heart to turn the excitable house-elf down, and, truth be told, it was absolutely delicious. He thanked Dobby and the rest of the house-elves, prompting a chorus of thanks from the entire table, before they began rising and walking out the door. Ginny grabbed his hand and hung back a bit, allowing her year-mates to walk ahead of them and sidled

up to Harry, sliding her arm around his waist as she said, "You look exhausted."

"Thanks," he replied dryly. "You look rather ravishing yourself."

She laughed lightly as he stopped her in the hallway and leaned down to nuzzle her neck, playfully nipping at her flesh. She swatted him on the arm and said, "Seriously Harry. You should take a nap or something. You can't just pretend like nothing's the matter."

Harry sighed, lifting his head and looking her straight in the eye. "I know. I was thinking about that earlier actually – not the nap, but about what I was going to do about all of this. I might talk to McGonagall. She said she would talk to Madam Pomfrey with me if I had more problems with visions."

"I think you should," Ginny stated, reaching up and cupping his cheek. "I know you think you can take care of yourself, and, while I'm sure you can, sometimes you have to let go of your stubborn pride and allow someone to help."

He nodded. She made a good point. "Maybe you're right. If I don't come up with a better idea, I'll talk to her Monday morning after class."

"Good," she stated, rising onto her toes and giving him a light, fleeting kiss. "Now, about that nap..."

"Yes, about that nap," Harry interjected with a coy smirk. "I might be willing to let go of my stubborn pride and allow someone to help with that." She rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Gin," he stated, letting the smile slide off his face. "I haven't slept so well as I did that morning, even if it was only for a couple hours."

Her face softened, and he saw something in her eyes – affection, he thought – shining brightly. "How about you lie down with your head in my lap? I still have some studying I need to do that somebody interrupted."

Harry quickly nodded his head. "That sounds great. My office?"

"Sure," she agreed.

As they walked, Harry's mind drifted back to the last time she had insisted he take a nap. He had wanted to tell her about the change in his Patronus form, but she had stopped him, insisting that he go to sleep right away. Since then, the opportunity just had not ever presented itself. They quickly arrived, and, with some minor transfiguration, Harry converted one arm of the sofa into a small desktop that extended partially over Ginny's lap. She smirked in approval and seated herself at that end of the sofa, pulling out a couple books and laying them on the wooden surface. Harry kicked off his shoes and sat down beside her.

She turned her head and gave him an inquisitive look. "Aren't you going to lie down?"

"In a minute. First, I have something I want to tell you," he said softly.

She frowned. "What is it?"

"It's nothing bad," he explained, not wanting to worry her. "It's just – oh, I don't know – embarrassing is not the right word."

"Whatever it is, you can tell me," Ginny interjected, her voice calm and patient.

"I know. I'm being stupid. Honestly, it's a good thing." He smiled, remembering the first time he had seen her successfully cast her Patronus. He was shocked when he made the connection and realised that it was his Animagus form - that somewhere in her thoughts as she cast the charm, she was thinking of him. It took powerful emotion to create a corporeal Patronus. It was hard to believe that he would be even a part of what triggered such a strong emotion within her.

Shaking his head at his thoughts, he continued, "There were dementors in the attack on Diagon Alley."

“And that’s a good thing?” she interrupted, frowning in confusion.

“No,” Harry stated, shaking his head. “No, but I had to cast my Patronus.” Her brow furrowed, showing that she was as confused as ever, and he realised he was bollixing the whole thing up. “My Patronus changed. I was worried at first that someone would recognise it and make the connection to me, but I didn’t have much of a choice. Only, when I cast the Patronus, it wasn’t a stag any more.” He paused, taking her hand into his and brushing his thumb over her knuckles. “It was a lioness,” he revealed softly.

His gaze was locked on her hand in his. Slowly, he looked up. Her mouth was hanging open. “How...?” she asked, drawing the word out slightly and trailing off.

“The form isn’t set,” Harry explained. “It can change in relation to your life.”

“Like what you think about to power the spell?” she asked.

“That can have an effect,” Harry agreed. “It’s more of a subconscious thing, though.”

“Oh,” she replied, dropping her head down.

“I do though,” Harry continued softly. She looked up at him sharply, and Harry fidgeted slightly under her scrutiny as he continued, “Think of you, now.”

The smile that lit up her face was more than worth the small moment of embarrassment in telling her. She lifted her hand to his cheek and leaned in. He immediately felt her lips on his and eagerly returned the kiss. Her hand moved from his chin to his cheek as her tongue brushed against his lips. Moaning deeply in the back of his throat, he opened his mouth to her and met her tongue with his. Suddenly, she pushed him down on the sofa, trailing after him. Turning onto his back, he kicked his feet up and banged his toes on the wooden desktop. He

barely had time to gasp in pain before her lips were back on his. Within moments, the pain was forgotten.

They kissed for a long time, her body pressing down on his. He attempted to shift his hips to try to avoid a growing problem, but she trapped his body against hers and refused to budge. When she finally pulled away, they were both panting heavily. She raised her head just slightly, her hair falling around their faces in a curtain, casting a fiery glow to her face. He had never seen anything sexier in his life, and her body pressed so tightly to his only accentuated that fact. As they lay there, breathing deeply to regain their wind, their eyes never left each other. Harry felt like he should say something, yet nothing needed to be said. There was nothing to say. He just wrapped his arms more tightly around her, and she slowly lowered her lips back to his for a slow, sweet kiss.

When she pulled away a moment later, she laid her head in the crook of his neck. Harry squeezed her gently and pressed his lips to the top of her head. As they lay there, his body began to relax. Her head was just under his nose, and with every breath he could smell her hair. He allowed his eyes to drift closed, and his arms began to relax their hold on her.

“Harry?” she said.

“Mmm,” he murmured.

“You’re supposed to be napping,” she stated.

“Mmhmm.”

“And I really do need to study,” she continued, but Harry did not reply. When Ginny lifted her head and turned to look at him, she found him fast asleep.

OoOoO

Harry was startled awake by a loud thumping noise reverberating through his office. The sudden motion threatened his balance, and he

was still too disoriented to correct himself in time to stop from falling off the sofa. He hit the ground, eliciting an "Oof," of both surprise and pain.

He heard Ginny's voice mumble something incoherently on the sofa as the pounding continued. He rose from the ground and glanced at the sofa to find that Ginny had burrowed her way into the cushions to try to hide from the noise. He smiled and chuckled lightly to himself as he moved over to the door and tore it open. "What?" he demanded as his eyes took in the slightly dishevelled appearance of Hermione.

"Don't take that attitude with me, Harry Potter," Hermione scolded. "What are you doing with Ginny in your office well after curfew?"

Harry's eyebrows shot up in surprise at her words. After curfew? His memory caught up with him, and he realised that they both must have drifted off to sleep. Shaking his head at himself, he replied, "Sleeping." Hermione looked sceptical and opened her mouth to say something, but Harry beat her to the punch. "If you don't believe me, see for yourself," he said, stepping back and sweeping his hand towards the sofa where Ginny's form was still sprawled out.

Ignoring Hermione for the time being, he walked over to Ginny and knelt at her side. He gently brushed her hair behind her ear and leaned in to whisper, "Wake up, Gin. It's time to head back up to the common room." She fidgeted a bit and mumbled something, but her words were muffled by the cushions in the sofa. Smirking to himself, Harry let his hand drift down her arm to her side and tickled her lightly. She jerked up immediately, slapping his hand away.

"What's the big idea?" she demanded fiercely, though the effect was mostly lost in her grogginess.

"We fell asleep, and Hermione was kind enough to come down and collect us," he explained. "It's after curfew."

She leaned to the side to look past Harry and said, "Hi Hermione."

"Hello Ginny," came the reply.

Harry watched as Ginny smiled somewhat sheepishly at the girl before turning back to him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep. When you drifted off, I just thought I'd lie with you a bit; I was afraid I'd wake you if I tried to move."

Harry smiled softly and reached out to brush a stray lock of hair from her face. "It's all right. I feel better than I have all week."

"What time is it, anyway?" Ginny asked him.

Hermione's voice immediately called out, "Ten o'clock; an hour after curfew."

Harry took Ginny's hand, and together they stood. While Ginny gathered her books together, Harry turned to Hermione. "Thanks for coming down to wake us. We might very well have slept through to morning if you hadn't." He sincerely doubted that as he would most likely have been awoken sometime in the night from a vision, but he felt it unnecessary to draw attention to that fact. When Ginny sidled up to him a moment later, he turned and asked, "Ready?"

The three walked back to Gryffindor Tower together. After a couple minutes of indecision, Ginny chose to resume her studying before going to bed. Harry shared a brief kiss good night before heading up the stairs. He had a bit of trouble falling asleep, missing Ginny's warmth and comfort, but he eventually managed the feat.

The next morning he remembered to tell Ginny about the letter from Remus. When she asked if he wanted her to go with him, Harry reluctantly told her that he did not think it was a good idea. He would be going out in public, and it would be easier to manage the trip on his own. Since the plan was to get in and out of Gringotts unnoticed, travelling alone was the best option.

After lunch that day, while watching two groups in his IHA class waging battle in a forest, Harry had a sudden epiphany. It was clear that the seven students in his BHA class had a certain fire to their duels that was lacking in his IHA class. Try as he might, Harry had been unable to duplicate that same spark in his more advanced class.

Well, if he could not duplicate it, then why not bring that fire to his advanced class? If Harry was a betting man, he would put money on his seven students from the BHA cleaning up in a duel against seven members of the IHA, and if being beaten by a group of younger students did not light a fire in their bellies, nothing would.

Harry spent the rest of the class thinking over the details of such an arrangement as he watched the mock-battles. It would take a certain bit of finesse on his part to get the right message across, but he thought he could manage it. There was also the matter of talking to his seven students in the BHA. It would not be an easy feat for them to walk in and defeat the older students. The disparity in spell knowledge alone gave the members of the IHA a significant advantage. He would have to make sure they went into the fight with confidence – and a healthy thirst to prove themselves.

He would also have to be careful in whom he selected to represent the IHA. He could not pick the seven best students, nor could he pick the seven worst. He needed to maintain a certain balance to lend credibility to the duel while not stacking the odds clearly in their favour. He had to make sure to select students that the others all respected – at least one student from each house would be necessary to reach the most number of people. By the time the lesson ended, Harry was greatly looking forward to the next week. Regardless of the outcome, it should prove to be quite entertaining.

OoOoO

Harry was unable to come up with any solutions to his sleeping problems, so, as promised, he stayed after class Monday morning to talk to Professor McGonagall. Once the door closed after the last student had left, his head of house rose from her chair and walked to the front of her desk before asking, “What can I do for you, Harry?”

Harry distractedly ran a hand through his hair, his hand lingering on the back of his neck for a moment. “Well, I’ve been having a lot of visions again lately,” he explained hesitantly. He was not very comfortable talking about the visions – except with Ginny.

“I had wondered,” his professor quietly mused to herself, though the words travelled to his ears. She looked up at him and in a normal voice asked, “Am I to assume that they have been disrupting your sleep again?”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“You have looked a bit more worn-out than usual, though not quite as bad as when we last had this discussion,” she stated.

“I was rather hoping to get some help before it got that bad,” Harry admitted. “I’ve done some research on my own into different options but was unable to find anything that looked promising as a permanent fix.”

“Yes, sleeping potions can be quite dangerous if not handled with caution,” Professor McGonagall said. “But, we may yet find a suitable solution for you. Would you like me to accompany you to visit Madam Pomfrey?”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that,” Harry replied.

“Very well; let us be off then.”

Harry followed her out the door and strode silently beside her on the way to the hospital wing. When they entered the facility, Madam Pomfrey was attending to one of her patients, so they waited quietly until she had finished.

The matron eyed them, Harry in particular, warily as she approached. “Tell me you have not managed to nearly get yourself killed yet again, Mr. Potter. I was rather hoping to break tradition this year.”

“Ah, no,” Harry replied. “I was rather hoping we could discuss a bit of a problem I’m having.” Glancing around the room at the few occupied beds, he added, “In private, preferably.”

She gave him a scrutinising look before turning her gaze to Professor McGonagall who nodded curtly. "Very well," Madam Pomfrey acquiesced. "We can speak in my office."

When they walked in, Madam Pomfrey sat behind her desk. In front were two relatively comfortable looking chairs. Harry pulled out his wand and turned to his Head of House, "Allow me." With that, he transfigured one of the chairs into a straight-backed wooden chair.

Harry just caught the corner of her lip twitching into a smile. "Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome," he replied, taking the other seat and turning his attention to the matron.

Madam Pomfrey was looking back and forth between the two of them as if trying to solve some puzzle. After a moment of silence, she shook her head and asked, "So what is it that you wished to speak to me about?"

"Well," Harry started, suddenly feeling a little apprehensive. "I've been having some trouble sleeping lately."

"And do you know the cause of these troubles?" Madam Pomfrey prodded.

"Yes," Harry answered succinctly. He looked over to Professor McGonagall, unsure how much he could disclose to the matron. She nodded her head almost imperceptibly, and Harry took that as his cue to continue. "I've been having a lot of visions, you see," he explained. "They wake me up in the middle of the night, and I find it nearly impossible to sleep after one."

"And these visions are of..."

"Voldemort," Harry quickly inserted, nodding his head sharply.

“I see,” she replied, leaning back in her chair. “The headmaster had you learning Occlumency in the hopes of blocking out these visions, correct?” Harry nodded. “And has that helped in any way?”

“In blocking the visions, no,” Harry responded. “It has helped a little in dealing with the visions after the fact. I am able to sort my memories in such a way that I don’t have to constantly relive what I’ve seen, but it seems to take a bit of time before I can completely get to that point.”

The room was silent for a long moment before Professor McGonagall spoke up. “You said you found it nearly impossible to sleep after a vision,” she stated contemplatively. “That would imply that you have not found it wholly impossible. Am I to assume that you have, in fact, managed to fall back to sleep after one?”

Harry nodded. “Once,” was all he said.

“And was there anything different about this one time that set it apart from all the other times?” his Head of House continued.

He reluctantly nodded again but said nothing.

“Well, what is it?” Madam Pomfrey demanded when he was not immediately forthcoming. “You’ve asked for our help, Mr. Potter. We can only give that to you if you cooperate.”

Sighing, Harry ran a weary hand down his face as he looked back and forth between the two. “I can’t believe I’m talking about this with you two,” he muttered under his breath. “It was Ginny,” he stated out loud. “Ginny helped me get back to sleep.”

Harry swore he saw Minerva’s lip twitch again before her features settled. “And how did Miss Weasley help exactly?” she asked.

“It was a little over a week ago,” Harry answered awkwardly, folding his hands together in his lap and staring down at them. “It had been a bad week as far as visions go, and she found me early in the morning and insisted that I return to sleep. I fought with her on it until she

offered to lie down with me. We didn't want to be seen, so we went to my office. She lay down with me, and before I knew it, I had drifted off to a peaceful sleep. I didn't really think it would work, but there you have it."

"I see," Madam Pomfrey commented, leaning forward on her chair with her elbows on her desk. "You are seeing Miss Weasley, are you not?"

"Yes," Harry replied, feeling his cheeks flood with the heat that he had been desperately trying to hold back since the start of this line of inquiry.

"There's no need to be embarrassed, Harry," Minerva chastised with a hint of amusement in her voice.

Harry looked over and glared at her for a moment before relaxing his features. "And how would you have felt at sixteen in my situation, calmly discussing how you slept with your boyfriend to your Head of House and healer?"

"Oh, I would have been mortified, I'm sure," she replied, not bothering to hide her smile this time. Madam Pomfrey unsuccessfully tried to choke back a laugh. "But I was not an Assistant Professor on a first name basis with my Head of House, nor did I have much experience with Hogwarts' healer back then – not nearly as much as you've had with Madam Pomfrey."

"Back to the point," Harry stated forcefully. "I somehow doubt setting up permanent sleeping arrangements with Ginny is one of my Hogwarts-sanctioned options."

Once she had regained her composure, Madam Pomfrey responded, "You would be correct. Now, how frequent is your sleep being interrupted?"

"Almost every night," Harry answered. He noticed her eyebrows rise at his admission, and he snuck a glance out of the corner of his eye to see a frown form on his usually stoic Head of House's face.

“How many hours of sleep do you typically get before the visions start?” she prodded.

“It varies,” Harry stated. “I tend to go to bed a little earlier than my dorm-mates, but I would say I tend to get around an average of around three hours of sleep when I get a vision.”

Madam Pomfrey made a clicking sort of noise with her tongue. “There’s no spell or potion that can substitute for a good night’s sleep over an extended period of time. An Invigoration Draught can keep you going through the day, but it will only end up wearing your body down more quickly.” Harry squirmed a bit in his chair but bit his tongue as she continued. “Most sleeping potions have hazardous risks if used on a consistent basis. You’ve had experience with the Dreamless Sleep Potion, but that is perhaps the worst of them all. It is highly addictive and will eventually rob you of your ability to sleep altogether, along with your sanity.”

“Since your problem seems only to occur in the middle of the night, you would need only enough potion to give you a few hours of sleep,” she continued, as much to herself as to him. “There’s no combination of potions that would allow us to give you the sleep you need every night of the week, but I think we can work out a schedule of sleeping potions that should give you the extra sleep you need three or four nights out of the week.”

“Madam Pomfrey,” Harry interrupted. “Is it safe to assume that none of these potions will do anything for dreams?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter, that would be a safe assumption,” she replied crisply. “As I stated, the Dreamless Sleep Potion is not one I would have you take with any regularity.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, Ma’am, but I don’t think the other potions will do.”

“And why is that, Mr. Potter?” she asked shrewdly, clearly unimpressed with his doubts.

“As I said, my Occlumency helps to shield me from the images after the fact, but I need a bit of time and distraction before I can shut my eyes without reliving the whole thing,” Harry explained matter-of-factly. “I’ve done my research, and the only potion I’ve found that will guarantee me a restful night is the Dreamless Sleep Potion.”

After a short moment of silence, Madam Pomfrey stated, “There is a weak sleeping potion we can try. I’ll be able to wake you from it if your sleep is restless. I’d like to try this avenue before we completely discount it. The mind is a tricky thing, Mr. Potter. You may not be able to escape those images while awake, but you never can tell what you’ll see in your dreams.”

Harry sighed, knowing what the outcome would be, but he reluctantly nodded his head. “Okay. Will I have to sleep here, then?”

“Yes,” Madam Pomfrey stated. “I’ll need to be able to monitor you after you’ve ingested the potion. If you appear troubled, I’ll wake you immediately.”

“Very well,” Harry agreed. “What if this doesn’t work?”

Her eyes flicked to Professor McGonagall’s for a brief second before settling back on Harry. “We’ll cross that bridge if and when we come to it.”

Harry nodded his acceptance. “Thank you Madam, Professor,” he said, nodding to each of them. “I guess I’ll see you tonight then, Madam Pomfrey?”

“9:00 sharp,” she replied.

Nodding, Harry exited the room. There was just a little bit of time left before lunch. Knowing Ron also had the period off, Harry decided to head up to the common room to try to catch a quick game of exploding snap. Over lunch, he hesitantly told his friends about his sleeping problems and the fact that he would be sleeping in the Hospital Wing that night. Ron, Hermione, and Neville were all rather

shocked by the whole thing. Harry had not let on that he was having regular troubles sleeping, and he had managed not to wake up his dorm-mates in the middle of the night with the visions, so they were none the wiser. Only Ginny knew, and it was readily apparent to the others that she was well aware of the situation.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Hermione had asked.

Harry could only shrug. “There wasn’t anything you could have done. I really prefer not to think about it too much.”

Thankfully, she had let it drop soon after that. After the meal, he gave Ginny a more detailed summary, including his revelation that they had slept together in his office following one of his visions. He gave her the exact details he had provided the two women, just in case the topic ever came up again. He wanted them to be on the same page. That evening, his friends all wished him luck as he departed for the Hospital Wing. Ginny offered to accompany him, but he shook his head. By the time he arrived it would be after curfew, and he did not want to be responsible for her ending up in detention. They said good night just outside the portrait hole, and Harry made the trek through the dim halls on his own. Seconds after pushing open the infirmary doors, a clock on the wall chimed the hour.

Madam Pomfrey strode out of her office and nodded briskly at him. “Good, you’re here.” She gestured to a bed near her office. “You’ll be sleeping here. I’ve set out some pyjamas for you.”

“I’ve brought my own, if that’s all right,” Harry interjected.

She nodded. “Certainly. You can use the privacy screen as you see fit. Assuming you experience a vision, ring the bell on the bedside table; it is charmed to ring another bell in my private quarters. I will then give you the sleeping draught and monitor you until such a time as I am satisfied your sleep will not be unduly troubled.”

“Thank you,” Harry responded, walking over to the indicated bed.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “Good night, Mr. Potter.”

“Good night, Madam Pomfrey.”

After drawing the screen around his bed, Harry changed into his night clothes and crawled into bed. He pulled out his book on the Wolfsbane Potion and began reading. After about a half hour, he felt his eyelids begin to droop. He set the book on the table and placed his glasses on top of it before drawing the covers up to his chest and shutting his eyes.

Hours later, he awoke panting and clutching at his scar. The vision had been especially horrible that night. He had seen many things and had learned to stomach many things, but the visions with children in them always left him shaken and unsettled. Voldemort had personally visited an orphanage that night.

An image flashed through his mind, and Harry quickly stumbled out of bed and into the loo. Crouching before the toilet, Harry heaved until his stomach was empty of everything but acid. Rising shakily, he walked to the sink and studied his pallid reflection in the mirror. Turning on the tap, he splashed water in his face, then cupped his hand and brought the water to his mouth. He swirled it and gurgled it before spitting it out into the sink. Repeating this process a couple times, he turned off the tap and took one last look into the mirror before walking back to his bed and ringing the bell on the bedside table.

Madam Pomfrey rushed into the infirmary a moment later, looking sleep-ruffled. Harry felt the slightest bit guilty at disrupting her sleep but knew there was nothing for it. “Hello Madam Pomfrey,” he greeted. “Sorry for waking you.”

“Nonsense,” she dismissed. “You had a vision, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got your potion right here,” she said, holding out a goblet.

Harry took it from her and inspected its contents. It was only about half full. In the dim light, he was unable to make out the colour, though it seemed dark. He held the goblet to his lips and quickly downed the contents. Madam Pomfrey took the goblet from him, and Harry settled himself under the blankets. When his head hit the pillow, he turned to wish the matron another good night. Before he could utter the words, the potion took effect, and sleep claimed him.

The nightmare began immediately, or so it seemed to Harry. He was at the orphanage, reliving the horrors that took place there not long ago. His unconscious mind did nothing to soften the terror and brutality; if anything, Harry thought his mind may have added to it. It was difficult to tell, though, and he really did not want to dwell on it. He had no idea how long he was trapped in the nightmare. It was long enough to feel as though he had relived the entire vision at least once over. As abruptly as the nightmares had claimed him, so too did they let him go. Harry sat bolt upright in his bed, gasping as he tried to erase the vision from his consciousness.

“Are you all right, Mr. Potter?” Madam Pomfrey asked, her voice much softer than usual.

Harry nodded sharply, not trusting his voice at the moment.

Sighing, she asked, “Would you like a bit of Dreamless Sleep Potion to get you through the rest of the night?”

Harry considered the question for a moment with his knees drawn up to his chest and his arms locked around them. He would love the opportunity to sleep peacefully to morning, but he knew that he should save the potion only for emergencies. Turning to face the matron, he shook his head and said, “I think I should wait until I absolutely need it.”

She studied him shrewdly for a long moment before nodding her head. “Very well. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Again, Harry shook his head. “If it’s all right, I think I’ll just head back to Gryffindor Tower. I can get a bit of revising done before everyone wakes.”

She did not seem particularly pleased - whether at his intended course of action or just the failure of her sleeping potion, he did not know. Nevertheless, she said, "Of course, if that's what you wish."

Harry collected the few belongings he had brought down with him. "I think I'll change before heading back," he informed her. "I hope you have a good night, Madam."

"Thank you," she replied. She seemed to want to say something else; her mouth opened, but she quickly closed it. Finally, she added, "Take care, Harry."

Harry spent the rest of the early hours in the common room. As the sun began peeking over the horizon, the sound of Ginny's footsteps preceded her entrance. As she stepped into the room, her eyes met his, and he noticed her slight disappointment at seeing him there. She was no doubt hoping he would still be sleeping in the Hospital Wing. Her question was written on her face as she approached, and Harry shook his head.

She continued walking determinedly towards him and walked around his chair to lean down and wrap her arms around him. "I'm sorry, Harry," she whispered, kissing the top of his head.

Harry said nothing. He held one of her hands in his and simply revelled in the comfort and warmth she provided.

Ginny relaxed her embrace and slipped into the chair beside him, never taking her hand from his. "What now?" she asked. "Does Madam Pomfrey have another plan?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know; the middle of the night didn't seem like the right time to discuss it. I doubt it though. She didn't seem too keen on discussing alternative options earlier." Ginny squeezed his hand but said nothing. After a minute, Harry sighed and stood, tugging Ginny's arm lightly. "Well, let's get to it."

Harry put the matter out of his mind. There was no sense worrying about it more than necessary. If all else failed, he would start taking

naps during the day. It was not an ideal solution, but he knew he was not likely to find a better one. He had another brief meeting with Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall that evening, but they seemed inclined to agree that, for the time being, taking naps during the day was his best option. Harry was unsurprised at the verdict, but he could not help but feel the slightest bit put out at the lack of other options.

On the bright side, Ginny offered her lap to him any time he needed it – never mind the fact that the last time he had intended to use her lap as his pillow, they had never quite made it to that position. Unfortunately, their schedules seldom coincided. Ginny was almost always busy with her classes nowadays, and he wanted to keep up on her training, which left very little extra time for other activities. More often than not, when they found such a moment, napping was not on his mind.

Tuesday evening, Harry asked his seven advanced BHA members to stick around after class. As the door closed behind the last of the students, Harry turned to survey them. They stood surprisingly straight, their attentions fixed solely on him. The curiosity was shining in their eyes, but none of them made a move to ask what was up. They would wait for him to start.

“Since the start of your duels, the seven of you have done nothing but impress me,” Harry began, meeting each of their eyes in succession as he spoke. “I don’t get to watch you nearly as much as I’d like, and the only reason our arrangement even works is because of the way you’ve all handled yourselves. You haven’t needed much instruction. I set you a task, and you’ve done all that I’ve asked and more.”

He could see the effects his words had on them. It was clear that Minerva was quite correct in her observations. They did look up to him. “Over the past month, I’ve gained a whole new appreciation for you and the hard working attitudes you have all displayed in your exercises,” Harry continued. “About a month ago, I shifted the focus of my second class to mock-battle scenarios. They are a little different from your own – the groups are larger, and they are battling in more lifelike settings – but they are based on the same principle.”

“Unfortunately, the students have not taken to the new exercises with the same fervour that you did. From nearly day one, you were applying strategy to your duels, treating them as life-or-death encounters, doing your absolute best not just to win but to avoid any casualties to your own side. Their duels employ hardly any strategy and typically end in a free-for-all of sorts. They treat the battles as a game with no consequences.”

Steeling his eyes, Harry swept his gaze across all seven students. “I’d like to ask for your help. Nothing I’ve said has made much difference, but I think you might have better luck. If you’ll agree, I’d like the seven of you to team up against a group of seven students from the Intermediate class this Sunday.”

Seven mouths dropped open. It was Ryan, the fourth-year Slytherin, who recovered first. “You want us to fight them?”

“Yes,” Harry replied, nodding his head.

“But they’re older and know a lot more spells,” Nicholas protested.

Harry waved a hand absently at their concerns. “Don’t worry about it. I have faith in you guys. If you go into this with the same attitude you always do, you’ll be just fine.” Smirking, he added, “Besides, just think of the bragging you can do when you wipe the floor with them.”

He could see a few eyes light up at that prospect. Ryan and Nicholas shared a wicked grin – it still surprised him to see a Gryffindor and Slytherin get along so well. Mary-Jo looked from one to the other before rolling her eyes, though her wide smile was genuine as her gaze lingered on Nicholas.

“So what do you say?” Harry prompted after a minute.

The seven students all looked to each other for confirmation before turning back to him. It was Ryan who spoke for the group. “We’re in.”

“Excellent,” Harry replied with a smile. “I knew I could count on you guys.”

That was one problem taken care of. He debated whether to tell his IHA class about the arrangements for the following Sunday or just wait until the class. He suspected that it would not make much difference, and, as he did enjoy surprises, he held that information to himself. He had not selected the seven students to represent the IHA yet, and, even if he had, he doubted they would take the time to plan any sort of strategy. After all, if they did not put much planning and strategy into duels against each other, why would they bother to do so for a duel against a group of younger, less-advanced students?

Before Harry knew it, the end of the week had arrived. He had a sudden inspiration during lunch on Friday. Though he was constantly improving in his new ability, he could not help but worry that the next time he was in a battle, he would quickly find the sheer amount of people and magic around overwhelming and disorienting. He wanted to get to a point where it was no longer something he turned on and off. After all, he would not always know ahead of time when he would need it.

He took advantage of the crowded Great Hall. His friends were all distracted with the meal, and he was sitting, slowly helping himself to his food, when he the thought occurred to him. He concentrated for a moment and winced as the sudden influx of sensations flooded his consciousness. He dropped his fork onto his plate and pinched the bridge of his nose but stubbornly refused to back down.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Neville asked from his side.

Harry swept his gaze over each of his friends, noting that they were all looking at him in concern, before finally settling on Neville. “Yeah, just a headache.” He adopted a small smile and picked the fork back up. “I’ll be fine,” he assured them, taking a bite of his potatoes.

He continued eating mechanically and did his best to follow the conversation, but most of his attention was focused on sorting out all the different inputs he was receiving. At first, it all seemed to blend

together, but, as he focused on it, he could begin to separate each of the sources. He even began to notice a distinct difference between each one, which made sense. No two people were the same, so it was only natural that the cores of their magic would all feel different as well.

He began concentrating on his friends, trying to associate the feel of their magic with each of them. In doing this, he noticed Ron turn to him and say something, but, so focused was he on what he was doing, the words did not register. Shaking his head, Harry said, "Sorry, my mind was wandering. What was that?"

"I asked what you thought about adding in an extra Quidditch practice to our week," Ron stated.

Harry frowned. "I'm not sure that's a good idea." Shooting a quick glance at Hermione, he elaborated. "Exams are coming up, and, while we don't have to worry about O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s this year, there are a few people on the team who do. I don't want to interfere with their studies."

"Blimey, you're starting to sound like Hermione," Ron responded in his shock.

"And what is wrong with that?" Hermione demanded, levelling Ron with a deadly glare.

"Nothing," Ron hastily assured her. "I just mean I didn't expect it from him, is all."

Hermione seemed mollified at that and turned her gaze to Harry. She seemed to consider him silently for a moment before saying, "I guess I didn't expect it either, but I happen to agree. I'm glad you've finally begun to realise the importance of your education."

Harry barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The statement was just so typically Hermione. Ron tried to protest that there was still plenty of time before exams and that they could back off when they got closer, but Harry did not budge. He did not place much stock in the

exams, but he knew they were important to others. Ginny was bogged down enough as it was, and she had held out the longest of all her friends. He did not want to imagine what it was like for Katie and the other seventh years. He would not do anything to add to their burdens. Besides, the team was looking pretty good, and they could always cram a few extra practices in after exams if need be.

By the time that was settled, it was time to leave for their DADA class. Harry coasted through the class as had become habit for him; they rarely ever touched on anything he had not already covered in his own studies. After class, he took an extra long nap in preparation for his planned excursion that evening – or early the next morning, rather. The only drawback came when he tried to go to sleep at his regular time that evening. It took a while for him to finally drop off, and it seemed like just moments later that he was caught up in a vision.

When he woke, Harry lay in bed panting. He was startled a short minute later as his alarm charm went off. Well, at least Voldemort had good timing. He took another moment to calm his racing heart and listened intently to the sounds in the room, taking in the deep breathing and snores of his dorm-mates in sleep. He covered himself first in a plain black robe, then in his Invisibility Cloak, both of which he had hidden in his bed, before quietly sliding open his curtains and exiting the room. He made his exit swiftly, climbing to the Owlery and transforming into an owl before taking flight and exiting the castle.

Landing in the outskirts of Hogsmeade, Harry reverted back to human form before Apparating to Diagon Alley. He walked up the stairs to the imposing white structure. He ignored the goblin standing sentry beside the large bronze doors, taking note that the goblin eyes momentarily flicked to his invisible body as he passed, and pushed through into the lobby of the Wizarding bank. He scanned the large room, taking stock of its inhabitants. Most of the counters sat empty, but there were still several goblins manning their stations. Only a handful of wizards littered the lobby, and Harry quickly spotted Remus loitering in a corner of the room.

Walking over, he stopped shortly before Remus and softly said, "Remus, I'm here." Remus nodded almost imperceptibly and, without a word spoken, led Harry into a corridor and through a wooden door.

The relatively small room was furnished with a small rectangular table with three chairs on each of the long sides. As soon as the door shut behind him, Harry removed the Invisibility Cloak. Remus took a seat on the near side of the table and motioned for Harry to take the chair next to his.

“I suppose that works better than any disguise,” he stated, nodding his head at the silky garment Harry was holding. Harry just smiled his reply, and Remus continued, “I asked the goblins to give us some privacy before the meeting begins,” Remus stated. “They have assured me that the room is completely secure.”

Harry nodded his head. “Thanks for setting all of this up – and for being here.”

“You’re welcome,” Remus responded. “Now, I thought I’d go over the basics of what you can expect here. The house will be purchased by a solicitor hired by a company of which you will be the sole owner. So, by extension, you will own the house through that company. It’s a bit more complicated than that as there will be measures put in place to make it more difficult to trace ownership of the house or the company to you, but, to be honest, even I don’t fully understand all the details.”

“Okay,” Harry said, then paused a long moment as he processed everything that was just said. “That makes sense. I had never really thought about any of that.”

“Well, I wouldn’t expect Voldemort to ever bother looking into Muggle records,” Remus stated. “But Dumbledore has many contacts familiar with the Muggle world. I wouldn’t put it past him to have those people checking records after you pull your disappearing act.”

Harry nodded his head thoughtfully. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

“Well, the closing on the house is scheduled for May 22nd,” Remus told him. “You won’t actually be present for that since your solicitor

will be taking care of it, but any time after that you should be able to start setting things up. How is your work on the wards coming along?"

"Good," Harry answered. "I've been practicing them individually. It hasn't been easy, but I've managed to cast each one. The only one I haven't attempted is the Fidelius, but I'll try it out soon. The real trick is going to be tying all the wards together, but I'm already working on it. I should have everything ready in a few weeks – maybe even by the 22nd if I'm lucky."

Remus was silent for a long moment following Harry's response. Finally, he let out a sigh. "To be honest, I'm not sure whether or not to take relief at that. Part of me is happy to help you in this, but another part is terrified for all that could go wrong. I guess that part of me was almost hoping you would find the wards too difficult and that you'd give up on this plan for now."

Harry was not quite sure how to take that statement. He had never really stopped to think how hard it might be for Remus to just step aside and allow Harry to make his own decisions. While Harry had proven that he could take care of himself, he knew that if something went wrong this summer while he was on his own, Remus would likely feel guilty about it. Remus knew what Harry was planning and, far from trying to stop him, actually went out of his way to help him. While the decision was Harry's, Remus had it within his power to stop him and chose not to. Harry just had to make sure not to do anything to make Remus regret his decision.

"I know you have your doubts about whether or not this is the right thing to be doing, but thank you for trusting me to make my own decision," Harry said earnestly. "I promise that I'll do everything in my power to make sure I am safe at home."

"Safe at home, perhaps," Remus responded. "But what happens when you have another vision? Will you contact the Order? Will you wait for our help? Once your cover is blown, the other members of the Order won't hesitate to bring you in by force. Have you thought about that?"

“I have,” Harry replied cautiously. “I don’t know what will happen. At some point, the Order will have to learn to trust me to make my own decisions and trust that I can take care of myself. Once I turn seventeen I’ll legally be of age and then they cannot legally force me to do anything. I’m not even sure it’s legal for them to force me now – probably only so because they’re forcing me onto my relatives who are still my legal guardians.”

“True,” Remus relented. “But don’t expect that argument to actually work against most of the Order. Most of us have already been through one war. The Order as a whole may not know the entire contents of the prophecy, but we all know that you are the key to defeating Voldemort. For most, that’s enough to keep you under lock and key until they see fit.”

Harry let out a humourless chuckle. “That makes it sound like I just have to show up at the right time, and Voldemort will just roll over and die. Don’t they realise that I need to train? That I need actual battle experience before I can face Voldemort?”

“To be honest, we’re all just placing our faith in Dumbledore,” Remus said with a sigh. “He’s our leader. He knows the whole prophecy. Everyone just assumes that he knows what he’s doing - that he has a plan. If he tells them you need to stay out of the fighting, that you’re too young or too important, they’ll believe him. I would have believed him if I hadn’t realised you were already taking part in the battles.”

Harry contemplated that for a long moment. Before he could formulate his reply, however, the door opened, and two goblins entered, followed by a man in gray robes. “Mr. Lupin. Mr. Potter,” the leading goblin addressed them. “Are you ready to proceed?”

Harry turned to Remus briefly before replying, “Yes.”

The meeting that followed left Harry’s head spinning. When Remus said that things were a bit more complicated than his simple explanation, he had not been kidding. Harry tried to follow everything, but more often than not ended up just nodding his head and grunting

his agreement at what seemed to be the appropriate intervals. There were various documents requiring his signature and even one requiring a drop of his blood. Harry made the mistake of trying to read through the first of these. He quickly realised they were not meant to be read by your average folk. The legalese was impossible to follow and only ended up giving him a headache. The fact that his scar was irritating him did not help matters.

The whole thing took nearly two hours. Harry thanked the two goblins and the solicitor for all their time and assistance and flipped his hood back up over his face before exiting the meeting room with Remus. By that time he was exhausted. All he could think of was his four-poster bed in Gryffindor Tower. He thanked Remus again before parting ways outside the bank. Harry quickly Apparated to Hogsmeade and made his way back into the castle. He used his Cloak and map to traverse the halls and enter the dormitory without anyone taking notice. He cancelled the illusion placed over his bed and eagerly climbed under the warm blankets. Seconds after his head hit the pillow, he was asleep.

Harry was exhausted the next day, and, after lunch, decided to take a nap. As he lay on his sofa trying to get to sleep, he could not help thinking back over his conversation with Remus. He had given some thought to how the Order would react when they learned that he was Jim, but with everything else on his mind, he had not given it much consideration. Remus had made an excellent point, though. Harry wanted to be able to work with the Order in battle in an effort to prevent more near misses like in St Mungo's. That had never been a part of his plans when he had come up with the disguise and alternate identity, but, now that he had taken part in several battles, he recognised the necessity of it.

He knew, however, that he could not keep up his charade as Jim forever, even if he wanted to. The truth would eventually come out, and better it be from his lips than from the next Order member to put together all the pieces of the puzzle. In any case, he did not even want to continue masquerading as Jim. He was sick of the secrecy – sick of the strain it put on his relationships. He was actually looking forward to coming clean with Dumbledore, the Order, and his friends.

It would be freeing to not have to constantly worry about it, wondering when it would all come crashing down around him.

Hermione alone was enough to make him want to get it over with. Not only was it downright annoying to have her actively spying on him, it was clear that their friendship would remain on hold until his secrets came out. As much as she got on his nerves, Harry could not quite deny that he missed her friendship – and Ron's as well. For the past five years, they had been his best friends – his family, and he hated the distance that had grown between them. It would be nice to be able to finally clear the air with them. He knew things would probably never be quite the same as they once were, but he was looking forward to at least getting back on the right track.

Finally, his mind began to relax, and he drifted off to sleep.

OoOoO

Ron stormed down the hall angrily, not sparing a thought for the other students in his path. Grumbles and complaints were uttered as he shouldered his way past the slow obstacles. This was getting ridiculous. This was twice now in as many weeks that Hermione had stood him up. Twice! He was not going to stand for it.

He knew Hermione's study habits as well as anyone. He had endured years of her badgering to get him to work harder – to do his homework and study for exams. Ron was also aware that, in large part, he needed those not-so-gentle prods to get to work. Hermione was good for him in that way – even if she could get rather annoying about it. He was willing to overlook that.

But this? This was beyond the pale. And he did not even have any clue what the pale was exactly; he just knew this was beyond it. He threw open the doors to the library, heedless to the studying students or irritable librarian inside. There was only one person on his mind right now, and she seemed to be the only person in the entire library who had not been disrupted by his entrance.

Ron stalked towards her, ignoring the stares from all the other inhabitants of the room. He walked right up behind her, reached over,

and slammed the book shut right in front of her face. He stepped back, a feral but satisfied smile on his face. For a long second, Hermione did not move. She was rigidly still. Then, slowly, she put her hands out on the table in front of her, and, in carefully measured movements, pushed her chair back and rose to her feet, turning around to face him. She was livid.

“What – do – you – think – you – are – doing?” she demanded in a cold tone, each word precisely punctuated.

“Taking you away from the library,” Ron stated matter-of-factly.

“And why, pray tell, are you taking my out of the library?” Hermione asked in a deceptively calm voice.

“Because I haven’t seen you outside of classes in a week,” Ron answered. “You were supposed to meet me half an hour ago.”

Hermione glanced at her watch briefly and seemed surprised at the time. “I was busy,” she responded distractedly. “Lost track of the time.” She turned back towards him, and a fire seemed to light beyond her eyes. “But that does not give you the right to come storming in here slamming books in my face.”

Ron met her glare and refused to back down. “And I didn’t the last time,” he fired back. “But...”

“Out!” the voice of Madame Pince screeched, interrupting his tirade. “The both of you. Now!”

Ron spun around to find the librarian directly behind him. He opened his mouth but shut it abruptly. He turned back around to face Hermione; she looked stunned more than anything else, as if she could not believe she was actually being tossed out of the library. With a smug smirk, Ron strode out of the library and back into the corridor without glancing back to see if Hermione was following. Before he even came to the first corner, he heard Hermione scream after him. “Don’t you walk away from me, Ron Weasley!” He turned on his heel as she stormed down the hallway after him. “I cannot

believe you just got me kicked out of the library!" She paused a second, and her eyes narrowed. "Are you smiling?" she demanded. "You've got some nerve!"

"I've got some nerve?" Ron retorted. "You're supposed to be my girlfriend! You asked me out, remember? Then you have the nerve to stand me up. Twice! What the bloody hell are you studying that could be so important as to stand me up two times?"

"You want to know what I'm studying?" she fumed. "You really want to know?" Ron just glared at her, silently challenging her to continue. "Harry! All right? I'm researching things to figure out just what the bloody hell is going on with Harry!"

Ron was so shocked by that response that he forgot to glare. He stared at her, wide-eyed, trying to comprehend what she had just said. Harry? "Huh?"

"He's hiding something," she stated, her voice returning to its normal volume, though it was still harsh. "Something big. And I won't just sit around waiting for him to tell us what it is – or to do something stupid like running off into a trap to save someone who wasn't even in any danger to begin with!"

Ron shook his head. He felt disoriented at the sudden shift in the conversation. "What do you think he's hiding?"

"I don't know," she stated, her frustration evident in her tone. "He's been too careful. It's all done either in his office or in the Room of Requirement, and he has wards put up to keep people out."

"Wards?" he asked. Since when did Harry know how to cast wards?

"Yes!" Hermione responded. "What could be so important or secret that he needs to put wards up to keep people out?" Ron just shook his head, but Hermione continued. "If he was just studying or practicing spells for the HA, he wouldn't need to be so secretive about it. We could even help him, but he's keeping us both out of it."

Whatever it is, he doesn't want either one of us – or anyone else – to know about it. Except Ginny."

"You think he told Ginny whatever it is?" Ron asked distractedly, trying to wrap his mind around this influx of information.

"I'm not sure, but I think so," she replied. "They spend so much time together, and it started before they were seeing each other. I can't be sure, but I think she at least knows what he's doing, even if she's not a part of it."

His head was beginning to hurt. "So Harry is hiding something, and only Ginny seems to know what it is?" he asked for clarification.

Hermione nodded exasperatingly. "Yes!"

"Don't you think that maybe they're just..." He broke off as a shudder went down his spine. He could not bring himself to say it. "You know..." The thought was just sickening. "Snogging?" The word left a bad taste in his mouth. He knew that Harry and Ginny were together. Some part of him knew that they were going to snog in private, but Ron had never allowed himself to fully consider that fact – and he never wanted to ever again.

"Well of course they are," Hermione replied. "But this goes back before that, and they don't spend all their time snogging. I realise for someone like you it's hard to imagine, but other people care about more than just snogging."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" Ron asked indignantly.

"Tell me, Ron," Hermione replied sweetly. "What did you have in mind for our date today?"

Ron opened his mouth to retort but closed it immediately. A coy smile had worked its way onto Hermione's lips. "Exactly," Hermione stated. "Girls want romance, Ron, not just snogging." And with that, she walked past him.

Ron stared after her, their conversation playing back in his mind. How the bloody hell had she turned everything around and walked out on top? She stood him up. There was no way in hell he was just going to forget about being stood up twice, and yet he could not muster the energy to get angry. There was too much to think about.

OoOoO

Sunday brought with it Harry's surprise for his Intermediate HA class. Harry stood before his students, the seven advanced members of the BHA standing behind him on the raised dais. His students did not appear to know quite how to take the news that seven of them would soon be fighting seven younger, less-experienced students in battle. Harry could not entirely blame them as he was sure the announcement came as a bit of a shock. When he further explained to the class that this exercise was in the hopes that they, and not their seven opponents, would learn something, well, they did not look very impressed.

Harry ignored their reaction; instead, he called out the names of the seven pseudo-random fighters who would participate in the exhibition. "Katie Bell, Daphne Greengrass, Zacharias Smith, Terry Boot, Colin Creevey, Cho Chang, and Ernie Macmillan. The rest of you will watch with me."

"Now, the rules are relatively simple," Harry continued. "Subdue all your opponents using only strictly non-lethal spells. Beyond that, anything goes. The battle will take place on a street. Each team will begin at opposite ends of the street and will be given ten minutes to grow acquainted with the setting and to come up with any strategies. We will be watching from a rooftop. Are there any questions?"

Harry surveyed the crowd of IHA members before turning back to his seven BHA members.

"Are we allowed to revive fallen team members?" Ryan asked.

Harry smiled at the question. "Yes," he answered. He turned back around to the IHA and repeated the question and answer to make

sure everyone was aware of the rules. When no more questions were forthcoming, Harry directed each of the two teams to enter the battlefield using two separate doors in the wall behind him. Harry, along with the rest of the class, entered a third door in-between the other two.

When he walked through the door, he found himself standing on the flat rooftop of a two story building. Looking left and right, he could see each of the teams a few buildings down in each direction. Casting a Sonorous on his throat, he announced, "Your ten minutes begin now."

As expected, he saw his BHA students immediately huddle up. His IHA members seemed to be talking amongst themselves, but none of them seemed concerned with the details. It was hard to tell from this distance, but Harry thought they were likely joking around rather than discussing strategies or preparing for the exhibition. The only one who appeared to be taking it seriously, so far as he could tell, was Cho. She walked around the immediate area for a few minutes before calling the others and giving directions – or so it seemed to him.

Harry glanced at the time, just another minute left. His IHA members were still standing out in the open talking, but his BHA members had all set into motion a minute ago. Harry was unable to even keep track of where all seven were as they moved into their positions. He suspected that one or two were even under the cover of Disillusionment Charms, which he had taught to them that last Thursday, hoping to see it employed today. It looked like he would not be disappointed.

When the final minute had passed, Harry cast Sonorous on his throat again and called, "Begin."

The huddle of IHA members broke up at his words and spread into a V formation as they began a slow advance. Only two BHA members were even visible, and, as expected, the IHA moved steadily forward towards them. Harry was watching intently, waiting for the action to explode, and he was not disappointed. Much sooner than he expected, Harry saw just a flicker of movement from behind the IHA. If not for the red spell that burst from seemingly out of nowhere, Harry might have dismissed it as a trick of his eyes.

Three spells in all were fired almost simultaneously, making Harry wonder how they coordinated the strike. All three spells hit their marks, and Terry, Daphne, and Zacharias fell to the Stunners. As soon as the spells hit, the other four IHA members all turned around at the sound of their falling members. Nicholas and Mary-Jo, the two BHA members standing out in the open, immediately sent a series of spells.

Cho turned back around and noticed the spell-fire. She yelled at her comrades to duck and threw up a shield just in time to block a spell heading right for her. They were not all as lucky. Katie and Ernie managed to dive out of the way of a couple spells, but Colin fell to what looked like a Petrificus Totalus. Rather than retaliate, Cho turned and cast Ennervate on Daphne, who was closest to her.

Not a full second after she cast the spell, another Stunner knocked Daphne back out of the fight. Unfortunately, the action caused one of the Disillusioned BHA members to give away his position. It mattered little, though, as he was able to side-step the Stunner shot from Katie, and, at that moment, his six teammates all exploded into action. Nicholas and Mary-Jo both ran down the street to join up in the action as their five Disillusioned comrades all left secrecy behind and began firing at will.

As the seven members joined up, they formed a half-circle around the IHA members, trapping them out in the open while also eliminating the risk of friendly fire. Harry could not help but be impressed. He wondered whether or not they had planned it that way, but, regardless, it was an effective and brilliant tactic. Outnumbered and encumbered by the bodies of their fallen teammates, Katie and Cho did remarkably well to quell the onslaught, but their best efforts were not enough.

They did manage to stun Sarah before Cho went down. Alone, there was little Katie could do. She tried reviving Zacharias, who was lying at her feet, and stood in front of him with a shield to try to prevent him from being knocked back out right away. The BHA reacted to the tactic immediately and spread out more to get around the shield. Zacharias was Stunned first, and Katie followed a moment later.

Harry turned around to survey the rest of the IHA class and saw a lot of wide eyes. Harry smirked and spun back around. With just a thought, a ladder appeared at the edge of the rooftop, and Harry stepped up to it. Harry paused on the ladder and said, "You can all go back into the main room. I'll meet you there in a minute." With that, he quickly descended the rungs of the ladder until he was standing on the main street.

By the time he turned around, all fourteen participants of the exhibition were back on their feet and facing him. "Everyone all right?" he asked. His question met with many nods and a few verbal responses in the affirmative. "Excellent. The others are all waiting on us in the main room, so let's go."

Turning around, he opened the door on the building behind him and stepped aside, ushering his students through. Following after them, Harry stepped onto the raised dais to address the class. "Let me first say thank you to our seven visitors for agreeing to help me today. And another thank you to those of you who fought against them. For the past few weeks, I've spoken to you time and again on how I want you to treat these exhibitions, and now, with a little help, I've given you an example of exactly what I was talking about."

Taking a deep breath, Harry plunged on. "There's a war going on right now. I realise that inside these castle walls it's hard to fully grasp that, but these lessons are meant to prepare you for the worst. Voldemort and his Death Eaters are terrorists. Many of you are Muggle-borns or half-bloods, and those pure-bloods among us, if for no other reason than the fact that you're here right now learning from me, will be cast in the same lot. You're all potential targets. I don't know if Voldemort will target you, but he could. You need to be ready. From now on, I expect to see a whole different attitude in these battles. Each battle should be approached as if your lives are on the line because that's exactly what's at stake in this war."

A/N: A quick note to any canon police out there: keep in mind that I only follow canon through OotP, and that includes magical theory. I am more specifically talking about my interpretation of the workings of

the Fidelius Charm which does not follow what we learned about the charm in DH. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 25: Disappearing Act

With a full week of May already under their belts, Hermione absolutely insisted that Harry buckle down and study for the upcoming exams. Knowing how much exams meant to her, Harry decided to give in to her pleas. After all, it would be good to review all the material they had covered over the past year. When she proceeded to hand him a schedule that would basically take up every free moment he had up until the exams, however, Harry balked.

“I’m sorry, Hermione, but there is absolutely no way I’m going to follow this schedule,” Harry told her. His eyes flicked momentarily to Ron who was nodding emphatically in agreement.

With her hands on her hips and her eyes narrowed, Hermione said, “You can’t expect to pass your exams if you’re not willing to put in the work. If you had agreed earlier, I could have spread it all out for you, but, as it is, we have to just cram as much in as we can.”

Harry had to resist the strong urge to roll his eyes. “Hermione,” he started, pausing to make sure she was listening to him. “I don’t need to cram. I already know the material. Some extra time to refresh that knowledge would be nice, but I don’t need all this.” He waved the parchment holding her schedule back and forth.

She glared at him for a moment and took a deep breath as if she was going to start on a rant. Instead, she exhaled and shook her head. “All right,” she said, and the words looked as though they pained her. “When would you like to revise then?”

Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ron’s eyes bulged out when Hermione backed down. Then, just as swiftly, his eyes narrowed into a calculating gaze focused on his girlfriend. Did Ron know something?

Harry put the matter out of his mind as he put his head together with Hermione to work out a schedule that he found to be much more reasonable. After they had finished, Ron leaned over and glanced through it briefly before sitting back and looking at Harry. “Much better. Can’t have our seeker too tired to get on his broom, can we?”

“How can you be worried about Quidditch with exams coming up?” Hermione demanded threateningly. “You should really consider having fewer practices to give everyone more time to study.”

“Are you barmy, woman?” Ron retorted. “We can’t cut down on practices. The cup is almost ours.”

“Oh, who cares about a silly cup?” Hermione protested.

“Silly?” Ron gasped. “Silly?!”

“Yes, silly!” Hermione returned. “Honestly, Ron, what is a silly little cup going to do for you? You need to learn the material so that you’re not behind next year. Your N.E.W.T. results will determine what jobs you can get after school.”

“Quidditch is not silly!” Ron nearly shouted. Harry was just starting to back away when Ron turned to him and said, “Help me out here, Harry.”

Harry shook his head, not wanting to get involved in their argument, but it was too late.

“Tell him that exams are more important,” Hermione insisted.

Harry sighed, looking back and forth between them. “You’re both right. Exams are important which is why we are not adding any extra practices; however, Quidditch is also important, and we will not be cutting back on practices either.” With a mischievous smirk he added, “Now kiss and make up, or whatever it is you do nowadays.”

They both stared open-mouthed at him for a moment before coming to their senses. Ron turned to Hermione and quirked an eyebrow, but she just harrumphed, stuffed her books in her bag, and stormed out of the common room.

Harry clapped his friend on the shoulder and said, "Sorry, mate. I tried." Ron turned away and walked up the boys' staircase without saying a word.

OoOoO

Harry settled very quickly into his new routine. Not only did his revision schedule change, but he began taking regular naps during the day. It was funny, he thought, the way unfortunate circumstances could sometimes work in your favour. Now that he had come out to his friends and Head of House about his visions, taking regular daytime naps was seen as a perfectly ordinary occurrence for Harry. Not only this, but when Ron or any of his roommates awoke in the middle of the night and found Harry's bed empty, they assumed he had had another vision and was unable to get back to sleep. A few times, Ron or Neville had even wandered down into the common room on such an occasion to see how he was doing. They would talk to him for a bit before heading back up to bed.

One such time, Ron had found the common room empty and questioned Harry as to his whereabouts during breakfast that morning. Harry had calmly stated that he was feeling a bit stir-crazy and needed to go for a walk. Harry had the perfect excuse to be missing at any given moment in the middle of the night, and no one thought it odd to find him making up for the lack of sleep during the day.

Harry's daytime sleep was mostly uninterrupted. He had experienced only one vision during the day since starting his naps. Luckily, he had not been witness to any of the acts he usually saw at night, but what he did see was just as ominous. Lucius Malfoy had just finished giving a report to Voldemort that seemed to have piqued the Dark Lord's interest. Unfortunately, Voldemort was keeping a tight leash on his thoughts, so Harry was unable to glean any details. Something about Voldemort's feelings had Harry on edge, but he could not quite place his finger on it.

Even though he was regularly getting a good amount of sleep, the change to his sleeping habits left Harry feeling constantly drowsy, as if his body did not know when it should grow tired and demand more

sleep, but it was such an improvement over his previous exhaustion that, so long as he kept himself occupied, he hardly even noticed.

Harry used the privacy afforded to him in the middle of the night to his advantage. Not even Hermione made any attempt to track him at night. Harry guessed she was unwilling to break curfew by following him around the castle, or perhaps she merely needed her sleep. He tried not to become too relaxed, however. 'Constant Vigilance,' was one motto he could fully embrace. He had begun instinctively searching for any magical sources around him rather than doing it consciously, so he was sure that he was never being followed at night.

He often made his way to the Owlery in order to sneak off the grounds. He had wards to practice, after all. There were only a few days left until the house would be his. Harry had visited the house a few times in the middle of the night. He had not gone inside yet but had walked around the property to make some notes on the placement of the wards. He had already finished his calculations and was anxious to begin the casting.

In addition, Harry had tried and successfully cast the Fidelius Charm several times now. He started small, hiding just a small one metre by one metre section of land, but his last two attempts had hidden an enormous oak tree and a derelict Muggle play park. The charm was very draining, but he was confident now that he could cast it over his new property without issue. He made sure to dispel the charms after several days. After all, there was no sense hiding a tree and a run-down play park. Following his success with the Fidelius Charm, his preparations were complete.

As fast as most of May seemed to pass by, the last few days leading to the day of his house-closing were agonizing. The fact that he was so well-prepared was working against Harry. He had been so busy the past several weeks that he had hardly noticed the passage of time, but now that the day was almost upon him, there was nothing left to divert him – at least nothing relating to the warding of his new home.

As a result, Harry found something else to occupy his time. It was something he had been mulling over for the past few weeks but had

not had the time or opportunity to look into until now. The speech he had given to his HA class about the realities of the war had enacted quite a change in attitude among his IHA students, but it had affected him at least as much as it had his class. He had never before admitted to himself that their association with him would likely paint targets on all their backs. Their membership in his class was not a secret. No doubt Malfoy or one of the other Death Eaters' children had already sent out a list of all Harry's students. Now, with the end of term rapidly approaching, Harry worried what that would mean for his students over the summer.

Yes, he had been training them to fight so that they could survive such encounters, but they were not prepared. There was not enough time, and there never would be. No amount of training would guarantee their survival. He needed to give them a backup plan. After all, when Death Eaters attacked, it was in mass numbers. Some of his best students might be able to hold their own against one or even two Death Eaters, depending on who they were, but any more than that was certain doom.

When the answer hit him, Harry could not believe it had taken him so long to think of it. After all, the Death Eaters had their own backup escape plan. While they used anti-Apparation wards to prevent their victims from escaping during an attack, they relied on Portkeys to avoid capture in an emergency. He had never actually witnessed the Death Eaters using anti-Portkey wards, so he would take a page out of their book.

Portkey creation was regulated by the Ministry, so instructional books were not exactly commonplace. Luckily, Harry happened to be in possession of just such a book. He had nicked it from his vault that summer but had never found the time to peruse it. Harry wondered how he could have let it slip from his mind. He decided that the first thing he would do was to make a Portkey for himself as a precaution, in case he ever found himself in a sticky situation and needed a quick escape. Assuming he was successful, he would then work on creating Portkeys for all of his HA students that would take them to the gates of Hogwarts – he did not trust the Ministry and was sure Dumbledore would take care of them from there. If the Ministry found out about his illegal Portkey creation, Harry would be in serious

trouble. Luckily, the contract he had insisted the HA members sign at the start of term prevented them from talking about anything related to the HA to non-members, so there was little chance of anyone finding him out. If they did, Harry knew that it would be worth the consequences just to save a single life.

As he delved into the book, Harry quickly learned about the different types of Portkeys. The magic behind the actual Portkey was pretty much the same across all the different variations, but there were different triggers that it could be tied to. The trigger could be any number of things: touch, a specific time, or a key word. For his purposes, a key word was best. He would not want the Portkeys to activate at an accidental touch, and he did not possess a timetable of future Death Eater attacks.

He occupied the final days leading up to his house-closing reading up on Portkey theory. It sounded like a complex bit of magic, but Harry knew it was only a matter of time and practice before he got it down. By the time he finished the book, the evening of the 21st had arrived and with it a full moon. Harry retired for bed early with hardly any notice and, after casting his illusion, aversion, and confounding charms on his four-poster, he transformed into an owl and took off out the window.

Ginny had informed him earlier that she was going to skive off of meeting Remus that night. Not only did she have a lot of revision to work on, but she commented that she had received some questioning stares from Hermione after the last full moon. Rather than risk tipping her off, it was safer for Harry to go it alone this time. He could not deny that he would miss her presence, but neither could he fault her reasoning.

So it was that Harry traversed the long tunnel underneath the Whomping Willow alone. Upon arriving, he opened the trap door and climbed up into the Shrieking Shack. "Hey, Remus," he greeted upon spotting the werewolf.

"Hello, Harry," Remus replied. His eyebrow rose in question a moment later as he asked, "No Ginny?"

“Nah, she’s a bit busy with O.W.L.s,” Harry explained. “Plus, she thinks Hermione might be catching on to the fact that something is up with us on the full moons.”

“Oh?” Remus queried. “I would have expected Hermione to catch on long before now.”

Harry chuckled dryly. “I think she’s been a bit busy trying to figure everything else out. This was just too low on the radar, I guess.”

“I had wondered,” Remus started contemplatively. “You were always so close with Ron and Hermione. It surprises me that you continue to keep everything secret from them. More than that, it surprises me that they haven’t tied you down and demanded the truth out of you.”

Harry laughed outright at that. “You know, I don’t think Hermione’s far from that point. She’s been following me lately. If she hadn’t been convinced everything was about Sirius at first, I think she would have really got on my case a long time ago. She was really thrown off by that, I think.”

“That’s hardly surprising,” Remus replied. “To be honest, I was surprised at how well you were managing over the summer. I was just so relieved at the fact that I didn’t dare question it.”

“If not for my rather unique circumstances, I probably would have been a mess,” Harry admitted with a slight pang of both pain and embarrassment. Shaking his head at himself, he added, “Hell, I was a bloody mess before Sirius popped up in my dreams.”

“You know, I can’t help but think that he’s having a great laugh right now,” Remus stated. “Just knowing that he helped set you on this path, fooling Dumbledore and the entire Order, not to mention screwing up Voldemort’s plans on multiple occasions. And all from beyond the grave. He would find it all to be rather hilarious.”

Harry smiled. “I hope so. He and my dad.”

“Oh yes, definitely,” Remus agreed. “James would most certainly approve of how you’ve managed to fool everybody from right under their noses.” They both laughed lightly, and a comfortable silence descended over the pair as they were both immersed in their thoughts of loved ones lost. After a couple minutes, it was Remus who finally broke the silence. “So, tomorrow is the big day, huh?”

A wide smile stretched across Harry’s face. “Yep. I cannot wait. The last few days have been practically unbearable.”

“I can only imagine,” he responded with a warm smile. “And how are the preparations?”

“All done,” Harry answered, smiling. “I finished the last of the calculations several days ago. That’s why things have been so unbearable the last few days; I haven’t had anything to do.”

Remus laughed. “Nothing passes the time more than keeping occupied.”

“Don’t I know it,” Harry grumbled. “I threw myself into studying Portkeys just to stay sane.”

“Portkeys?” Remus questioned. “Where did you...?”

“Potter vault,” Harry interrupted. “Otherwise I wouldn’t even know where to look since it’s Ministry regulated.”

“Ah, I should have guessed,” Remus responded. He looked as though he would have continued, but then his body tensed. Even before he opened his mouth, Harry knew what he was about to say. “You’d better transform, Harry.”

Harry nodded his head at the man and stood, immediately shifting into his panther form. He padded back and forth as he watched his friend go through the painful transformation. On top of the usual wrestling around, their ability to mindspeak provided an entirely new dynamic to their time together. They settled down after a bit, talking about Harry’s new house, the war, and whatever else happened to

come up. His scar started to burn after a little while, but he did his best to block out the sensation, glad to avoid the vision that surely would have accompanied it had he been asleep at the time.

When Harry asked about his relationship with Tonks, he was surprised when Remus paused and seemed almost unsure of his answer. Are things not going well? Harry questioned in concern.

It's not that, Remus assured him. Things are actually great. It's just – it's hard to explain.

Harry remained silent, sensing that the man just needed a moment to think. He was almost convinced that Remus had said all he intended to say on the topic, when the werewolf spoke again. Everything just seems to be happening so fast. She's so young, and we've only been together a few months now. I'm worried that the war might be influencing us a little. I don't want this to be something we rush into.

What exactly are we talking about here, Remus? Harry asked. He knew that there was a part of the conversation that he was missing. There was obviously something more to their relationship than was evident to him, but he did not know what that was.

I love her, Harry, Remus responded, seeming almost surprised at his own words.

Oh. To say Harry was caught off guard by the candid reply would be an understatement. Love was not exactly within his realm of experience. Have you told her?

The werewolf shook his head. No.

Why not? Harry asked.

It's nothing. Forget I said anything, Remus stated, the firm tone coming through strongly even through mindspeak.

Harry frowned. It obviously was not nothing, but he did not want to push the issue. Finally, he said, Well it's obviously something, but you don't have to tell me if you'd rather not.

It's not that, Remus replied. It's just – hard, I guess. I haven't quite worked it all out myself.

Harry eyed the werewolf speculatively but let the matter drop. This was something Remus would have to process on his own. The pain in his scar had faded, so Harry told the werewolf he was going to have a bit of a lie in. He curled up and closed his eyes, but, no matter how tired he was, sleep would not come. Hearing Remus talk so plainly about his feelings for Tonks forced Harry to examine his own relationship with Ginny, his own feelings. The words, "I love her, Harry," kept repeating over and over in his mind.

As he lay there in the Shrieking Shack, Harry thought over all that had happened over the last year. His life had turned upside down. Between coping with Sirius's death, the prophecy, all his training, fights with his friends, keeping secrets from everyone, and battling Death Eaters, there had been only one constant. He knew how much he depended on Ginny and how much he cared for her, but it had never occurred to him that what he was feeling could be love. It seemed like such a foreign concept, yet now that Remus had brought it up, he could think of nothing else. Did he love Ginny?

Somewhere in his pondering, Harry must have fallen asleep, for he was shaken awake quite suddenly by Remus. Looking exhausted, Remus urged him to head off back to the castle, which he did. The sun rose on the day without fanfare. As he saw Ginny that morning, his thoughts from the night before came back to him, and he had to swallow the sudden lump that had appeared in his throat. He was not quite ready to declare it love, but he knew his feelings for her were unlike anything he had ever experienced before.

She seemed to sense his internal struggle, for she frowned and asked, "Is everything all right, Harry?"

Smiling and trying his best to keep the blood from rushing to his face, Harry answered, "Yes, everything's fine. Just a little tired is all. Are you ready?"

Ginny gave him a speculative look but nodded her head. The workout helped to take his mind off his earlier thoughts, though he found his eyes glancing in Ginny's direction more often than he had ever noticed them doing so in the past. There was something about her, dressed in her simple workout gear with her hair in a pony and a thin sheen of sweat glistening on her skin, that Harry just found altogether appealing. More than once he had to forcibly tear his eyes away from her in order to continue with his own exercises.

As they were heading towards the showers, Harry caught her hand in his and, as she turned towards him, he tugged her into his chest and leaned down to capture her lips in his. After a brief, demanding kiss, he let her go and walked off to take a shower – a cold one. As he was entering the shower room, he glanced over his shoulder to find Ginny standing right where he had left her with a glazed look in her eyes, causing Harry to smirk. Make that ice cold.

The freezing water seemed to do the trick. As Harry finished getting dressed, he found he could not keep his mind off the monumental occasion taking place that day. His solicitors were closing on his house. By the end of the day, it would be his. Despite the magnitude of that event, nothing about his day was any different than an ordinary day. Indeed, it was a struggle to go through his day as if there was absolutely nothing extraordinary about it. He had to school his features to keep from grinning for seemingly no reason at all.

He noticed Hermione giving him speculative looks during breakfast, so he was not sure how successful he had been. Then again, she often gave him probing looks nowadays, so that in and of itself did not say much. During lunch that day, she asked him how he was adjusting to his new sleeping schedule, so perhaps she was only worried that he was not getting enough sleep.

He made it through the rest of the day without drawing any intrusive questions, so he called his efforts a success. He was reluctant to go to sleep that night as he was too anxious to begin the work on his wards, but he knew he had to maintain appearances. So, well before any of his roommates were even contemplating sleep, Harry bid his friends good night, gave Ginny a kiss, and then headed up the boys' staircase. After preparing for bed, Harry slid under his covers and,

after shutting the curtains, immediately began sorting out his memories of the day. He then relied on his Occlumency skills to shield off his anxiety about the house to allow himself to fall to sleep.

Harry was thankful when his alarm – charmed so only he would hear it – woke him a few hours later. It was not the most pleasant noise to wake up to, but it was always a relief to avoid being awoken by a vision. He silently parted his curtains and slid out of bed. After throwing on some clothes he walked out of the room and down the stairs to the common room. Harry's magical sense confirmed what his eyes and ears were telling him. The room was empty.

Harry exited the common room, glancing over his head to find the Fat Lady asleep in her portrait. She was rarely awake at this hour. While most of the portraits appeared to be asleep, he would not put it past them to be secretly keeping an eye out, so Harry quickly made his way to his office. He opened the door and stepped inside, keeping the door open while he donned his Invisibility Cloak. Stepping outside, he shut the door with a short wave of his hand. He had made this a habit whenever leaving the castle at night. It was unlikely that anyone would be able to track his movements, but, just in case, he wanted any and all evidence pointing towards his office.

He snuck out of the castle through the Owlery, chatting briefly with Hedwig in his owl form before taking flight for Hogsmeade. Landing in his usual, secluded spot, he reverted to human form and promptly Disapparated, reappearing just outside his new home. That was going to take some getting used to. He had a home now. It was not just a place that felt like home, as Hogwarts and the Burrow did, but an actual home to call his own. He spent a few minutes just staring at it in wonder. It was nothing all that special to look at, just a simple one-story home with white siding, a black roof, and a brick chimney, but it was his.

He finally shook himself out of his stupor and walked to the front door. Before constructing the wards, he wanted to take a tour. He had been wary of doing so before now since it was still technically owned by somebody else, but now that it was his, he was free to do as he pleased. The door was locked, but he hardly had to even think Alohamora before the bolt clicked. Turning the handle, Harry opened

the door and stepped inside. Feeling the wall to the side of the door, Harry found the light switch and flicked it on.

His circuit through the house was quick. He had work to do, after all. He made special note of all the white walls and knew immediately he would have to do something about them, but that would come later. After checking out the final room – his new bedroom – Harry turned out all the lights and went back outside. He nearly jumped out of his own skin when he opened the front door and came face to face with Remus.

“Merlin! Don’t do that to me,” Harry exclaimed in his shock.

“Sorry,” Remus replied. “I saw the lights on and was planning to find you inside, but you beat me to that.”

Harry raised an eyebrow speculatively. “What are you doing here?”

Remus shrugged. “I was curious, I guess, and was hoping you wouldn’t mind me watching as you set up the wards.”

It was Harry’s turn to shrug. “Suit yourself, but it won’t be very exciting, and it will take more than tonight to finish.”

That statement turned out to be quite true. Five nights in a row, Harry snuck out of the castle to his new home. He had only a few solid hours of work before he would be forced to go back to the castle, so the progress was a bit slower than he would have liked. Progress, however, was progress. What surprised him the most out of the whole process was how draining the wards were on his magic. After a month’s practice, he had known they would affect him, but he had not been prepared for the full impact.

After five nights of placing wards over his property and carefully tying them together, the strain was pronounced on his body and his magic. After the second night, Harry ceased any and all training during the day, save for his morning workout with Ginny, until the warding process was complete. The move proved wise as Harry was quite certain the strain would otherwise have been too much. He finished

the last wards on the fifth night and decided to wait to cast the Fidelius Charm. It was easily more powerful and more draining than any of the wards, and he did not want to risk bollixing it up.

Remus watched him for the entirety of the first night, but after that he made only short appearances to check in on the progress. On the sixth night, when Harry arrived to cast the Fidelius Charm, Remus was already there and waiting, looking rather anxious. Harry smiled reassuringly. "Relax, Remus. This will work."

"I know that. It's just..." the werewolf trailed off.

"You've seen it fail before," Harry finished quietly. There was a brief moment of silence as they both reflected on the past before Harry shook himself out of his musings. "But we've learned from their mistakes, and I'm not taking any chances."

Remus nodded. "But you will tell me..."

"Of course I will," Harry interrupted. "Tonight, if you stick around long enough. And I'll tell Ginny first thing tomorrow morning. You'll know where to find me if you need to, and you'll always be welcome here."

Remus stepped forward and gripped Harry's shoulder firmly. Harry met his eyes for a long moment before Remus nodded once and let go, stepping back.

"You should probably wait down by the street or something," Harry suggested. "I don't think it would be wise for you to be on the property for this one." Once Remus was clear, Harry set to work. The property was larger than any of his trial runs had been, and the drain on his magic was more than Harry had anticipated. He was determined, though, to see this through, and he pushed through the pain and exhaustion. When it was finished, he slumped to the ground and took a long minute to breathe and relax his body and magic.

Finally, Harry stood and walked back to where he had left Remus. As he approached, Harry saw that the werewolf's brow was furrowed in

confusion, and he knew immediately that the charm had worked to perfection. He knew he had exited the property boundaries when he saw Remus's eyes widen and lock onto him.

"You're finished, then?"

Harry nodded and softly, yet clearly, spoke, "Harry Potter lives at 165 Magpie Lane."

Remus stared at the house for a long moment before turning back to Harry and frowning. "You look exhausted," he commented.

"Thanks," Harry replied dryly. "You look smashing as well." When Remus narrowed his eyes, Harry added, "Honestly, Remus, it's nothing some sleep won't cure."

"As I understand it," Remus inserted, "sleep is not something you've been coming by easily as of late."

"Ever since I started taking naps during the day, things have been a lot better," Harry amended. "I don't particularly like it, but it's working."

Remus laid his hand on Harry's shoulder and gripped him lightly. "Sometimes life throws you into a situation where there is no great solution, and you just have to accept it and make the best of it you can."

Harry smiled wryly in reply. "Don't I know it."

Remus winced and let go of his shoulder. "Yeah, I guess that's one lesson you know all too well, isn't it?"

Harry shrugged. "You and I both."

They stood in silence for a long moment facing the house before Remus turned and asked, "So what are your plans now? You have to sit your exams, but will you stick around the castle after that?"

Harry, brow furrowed, replied, "Yeah, I think so. I hadn't really thought about it. I just planned on Apparating here after the train ride."

Remus nodded. "That's good. I think it would only complicate things unnecessarily if you were to leave early." Harry raised a hand to his mouth to cover a yawn. "All right, you should get back to the castle and try to get some sleep before morning."

"Good night Remus," Harry said. "And thanks again for everything."

"You're welcome, Harry. Good night."

OoOoO

Harry could not stop smiling all morning. Now that the warding was finished on his home, he was fully prepared for the summer. All he had left to do was finish out the term and Apparate home from King's Cross. His planning and preparation was all coming to fruition, and now he could just relax and enjoy the rest of the time left with his friends – and Ginny.

The smile slipped from his face momentarily as he came face to face with the realisation that he would probably not get to see Ginny much, if at all, over the summer. He had always known in the back of his mind that this would be the case, but he had never fully contemplated the notion before. If he chose to stay with the Dursleys, there was a chance he would eventually be taken to the Burrow or Grimmauld Place where he would get to see her. Instead, he would not be able to show his face at the Burrow without the Weasleys sounding the alarm to Dumbledore and the Order. He would find a way to see her, though. Whether he had to sneak into the Burrow or she had to sneak out, he was not going to resign himself to an entire summer without her.

After their morning workout, Harry told Ginny his address and cautioned her to remember it clearly in her mind in order to get around the safe guards of the Fidelius. As they walked to the Great Hall for breakfast, Ginny warned him not to smile too much, so Harry did his best to contain his feelings. Shortly after their arrival,

Hermione, Ron, and Neville joined them. Hermione, as had become custom lately, immediately flipped open a book and began reading as she first loaded her plate and then began eating her food. Ron, as had been custom for as long as Harry had known him, focused on nothing but his food until he had emptied a few platefuls down his throat.

It was after clearing his third helping that Ron put down his fork and turned to face Harry. "So Harry, I've noticed..." He stopped with a short yelp and looked sharply at Neville, who returned his look for a moment before quickly cutting his eyes to Hermione and back to Ron. Harry noticed Hermione's eyes were no longer moving back and forth behind her book as she was no doubt paying attention to what was going on around her. Ron rolled his eyes at Neville and continued. "I've noticed you've been disappearing at night a lot."

Harry just arched an eyebrow at Ron and said nothing, so Ron continued. "I woke up the past few nights and wandered down to the common room to find you missing."

"I've just been feeling a bit restless and needed to get out of there and stretch my legs," Harry replied smoothly.

"Oh," Ron answered. "Well, if you ever need company, you can feel free to wake me."

"Thanks," Harry said, a bit taken aback at the offer. He knew how much Ron loved his sleep. "I'll keep that in mind." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione frown for a moment before rededicating her focus to her tome.

OoOoO

With exams approaching so quickly, Harry decided to give both his HA classes a bit of a break. He did not cancel any of their lessons, but he decided not to teach any new material. Instead, he focused solely on the practical applications of his teachings. That is to say, he had all of his students duelling each other in one form or another. In a way, it was a good change of pace, as the constant practice would

improve their endurance. He could attest from personal experience that duels could last anywhere from several seconds to – well they could last a long time. It was best that they be prepared for such an occasion. If he could, he would have each of them running every morning just like him, but he knew such an edict would not hold well with the students. Pushing that on them with exams and the end of term around the corner seemed more than a bit silly.

Following such a session, he was cornered by the seven advanced students in his BHA class. “We were wondering if we could ask you a favour,” Sarah stated.

Harry quirked an eyebrow at the normally shy Hufflepuff girl. “Sure.”

“Well, we were hoping...” she trailed off.

“We were hoping you would give us another shot against you,” Ryan inserted.

“Feeling a bit confident, are you?” Harry teasingly responded.

“Not particularly,” Jennifer answered.

“Well, fighting each other is good practice and all,” Mary-Jo stated. “But it’s not quite the same thing, is it? The Death Eaters are going to be more experienced than us, so we need more practice against someone beyond our skill level.”

“A very good point,” Harry replied. “All right, you’ve got yourselves your duel. A week from today, so come prepared.”

“We will,” Nicholas answered.

“Thanks, Harry,” Sarah added.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Harry said. “I don’t plan on taking it easy on you.”

“Nor do we,” Quinn remarked.

Harry just smiled in reply, already looking forward to next Sunday. It was the last day before exams began and would hopefully provide the students an opportunity to loosen up a bit before exams began. In fact, he liked the idea so much, he thought he might do the same for his IHA class. There were so many students, though, that he would have to just take on a small group of them. How would he choose the group? The answer came to him at the start of the lesson Wednesday evening.

Harry informed his IHA class that they would be having a tournament of sorts. The groups would be randomly selected, and the winning group would get the opportunity to face him. He found their reactions rather comical. It was clear they thought him quite daft to be volunteering to single-handedly take on an entire group of them. With a smirk, Harry conjured a list of all their names and cast a spell to randomly split them into four groups. After revealing the teams, he announced which two teams would be squaring off first and led the rest of the students to the observation area.

By the time the second match was finished, they had already gone slightly over the allotted time for the lesson, so Harry called the class to a halt. He congratulated the two winning teams and informed them that they would face off first thing on Sunday. The winning team would then face him shortly afterwards. As the students all filed out, Harry received more funny looks, but most were content to leave without a word.

A few, however, hung around. Among them were Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and, surprisingly, Blaise. It was Blaise who spoke first. “What are you playing at with this?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, wanting to be sure of the question before he answered.

“I mean having the winning team face off against you,” Blaise tossed back impatiently.

“Well, I could use some practice too, don’t you think?” Harry asked with an innocent smile. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the corner of Ginny’s lips curve upward.

Blaise raised an eyebrow while Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “You think you can take on a group of almost ten of us? Don’t you think you’re being overconfident?” she countered.

“I think it will be fun,” Harry answered evasively.

“I’m going to enjoy having a go at you,” Blaise remarked.

“You have one more battle to win yet,” Harry cautioned.

“Oh, I’m not going to let this prize pass me by,” Blaise assured him. “And I expect you to put up a good fight.”

“No worries,” Harry replied.

“Good,” Blaise said with a smile. “See you Sunday.”

Harry nodded his goodbye to Blaise and turned to the rest of his friends with an expectant look. “Well?”

“You’re barmy, mate,” Ron stated in a deadpan.

“He’s not crazy,” Luna inserted, stepping up next to Ron. “He just knows something we don’t.”

“What’s that?” Ron asked in confusion.

“Well, if I knew, then it wouldn’t be anything I didn’t know, would it?” she responded dreamily, while determinedly inspecting the cuff of Ron’s robes to the consternation of both Ron and Hermione.

Harry smirked at Ginny, who had stuffed her fist in her mouth to keep from laughing, and then he turned and caught Neville’s calculating

gaze. "I reckon you're right, Luna," Neville agreed. "I guess we'll just have to wait for Sunday to find out."

OoOoO

After his Transfiguration lesson the following afternoon, Harry informed Professor McGonagall of his plans for both HA classes, inviting her to observe the battles as she had previously requested. She informed Harry that she would not miss it. With that settled Harry left the classroom and made his way up to his office to take his daily nap. He was awoken a couple hours later by a soft kiss on his lips and blearily blinked his eyes open to find Ginny hovering over him, a small smile on her face.

"I almost didn't want to wake you," she informed him softly. "You looked so peaceful."

Harry smiled crookedly in return as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "There's no better way to wake up," he replied, earning him another kiss. When Ginny moved to stand back up, Harry stopped her with his hand behind her head and pulled her back down for another.

When Ginny pulled away again, she lingered over him and gazed speculatively down at him. "What's going on in that head of yours?" she asked him.

"What do you mean?" Harry answered in confusion.

Ginny shook her head slightly as she responded, "I can't pin it down exactly. There's just something different about you. The way you look at me and the way you kiss me."

"Er – there is?" Harry asked thickly, wondering how she could sense such a difference. There was little doubt in his mind where the difference came from, though he had no idea he had changed in any way. Remus's words had never left him since that night, and he found himself contemplating them more often than he would ever care to admit. He was sure of one thing: if he ever loved anyone in his life, it was Ginny.

She nodded slightly. "Yep. I thought I was imagining things at first, but there is definitely something different."

"That's not a bad thing, is it?" he asked, as he struggled in his mind over what to do. A part of him was ready to just blurt out his feelings for her, but another part of him was doing its best to beat that part into silence.

Ginny frowned. "No. I don't think I'd call it bad," she said. "If anything, I'd say the opposite."

"Oh?" Harry replied, his warring mind preventing him from saying more.

Her eyes were searching his as she explained. "The way you look at me, I feel almost like I'm the only thing you see. The way you kiss me... well, let's just say I love the way you kiss me."

Harry smiled widely and sat up slightly to put that statement to the test. He did not pull away until his abs began to burn from the improvised crunch.

"It'll take a lot more than that if you're trying to get off the hook," Ginny teased.

Harry chuckled and replied, "As you wish." Grabbing her around the waist, he dragged her bodily on top of him and then turned to pin her to the back of the sofa. His lips seemed to reclaim hers of their own volition. When he pulled back from her some time later, he hesitantly asked, "You know I'm not trying to avoid your question, right?"

She leaned back as much as her position allowed and frowned slightly as her eyes surveyed him. "I know. I was only teasing. But you do know that you can talk to me about anything, right?"

"I do. You're the only one I've ever really felt comfortable talking about a lot of things with," he admitted. "And I want to tell you this too; it's just not easy."

She cupped his face in her hand, rubbing her thumb over his cheek bone. "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

Harry smiled, feeling both grateful for the easy way out and guilty for taking it. They laid there in a comfortable silence for a long moment before Harry sighed and said, "We're really late for our training."

"Yeah, I guess we are," she agreed.

Leaning in for one more brief kiss, Harry added, "It was worth it though." With that, he rolled off the sofa and onto his feet, then turned to give her a hand up. After straightening out their clothes a bit, the two began their trek up to the Room of Requirement. It quickly became clear to Harry that the two of them were being followed, so Harry leaned in close to Ginny's ear to inform her that Hermione was on their tail. When he leaned back, she turned her head to the side and cocked an eyebrow at him. "I know."

Harry furrowed his brow, wondering how it was she knew. Perhaps she had noticed Hermione following her to his office? Had she picked up on something that he had missed? The question was left unasked and unanswered as they quickly arrived at their destination. As soon as the door shut behind them, Harry quickly set up the wards and cast the extra charm to allow them to see and hear through the door as if it were open.

Not a full minute passed before Hermione sidled up to the door. She began tracing her wand over the door, presumably looking for something that would tell her precisely where she would need to tap in order to gain entrance. Even if she did manage to find the points, which she had as of yet failed to do, she would still need to decipher the correct order, and there were a couple surprises Harry had slipped into the mix to throw her off as well. After Hermione had started snooping around, Harry had done some extra research himself. He found a way to duplicate the magical signature of the points on the door one would need to touch and had added a few extra points that would make Hermione's life miserable as she tried to find the proper pattern. Not only that, but he discovered a way to

dampen the magical signature of the actual points, so it was likely she would not even find all of the correct points.

Needless to say, Hermione had her work cut out for her. Not for the first time, Harry wondered exactly what it was she hoped to accomplish by busting in on one of his training sessions. What did she expect to find? How would she attempt to explain breaking in on what they both knew to be a warded door? Answers were not forthcoming, but Harry was not terribly worried. The term was almost over, and Hermione was still far enough away from breaking his wards that he should be able to coast through to the end of the term without issue. That did not mean he would become complacent, only that he was not overly concerned over the matter.

After watching for a minute, Harry turned and set to work. He was focusing more of his time on Ginny lately as the approach of the summer holidays loomed over their heads. He knew it was unlikely she would find herself in mortal peril with all the safeguards her family would no doubt have in place, but he wanted her to be prepared for any danger that might cross her path. That meant improving both her duelling skills and her proficiency in wandless magic. He had her holding back her full potential in the HA classes so as not to completely outclass the other students, but in their private training sessions, he forced her to work her arse off in duels against him and the training dummies.

He was the one taking it easy now as he put Ginny through her paces. She was getting much better now. She had more control over her wandless abilities, but she was still not nearly as proficient as she was with a wand. Her reflexes were improving constantly. She was moving faster and more fluidly, dodging his curses and adding a few of her own, but she had a long way to go yet. He had a huge head start over her, and she seemed to be progressing more slowly than he had – though the fact that she did not have as much free time to dedicate to training probably had a lot to do with it.

On the other hand, her Occlumency skills seemed to be progressing much more quickly than his had. Three weeks ago Harry had begun prying into her mind in two places at once, and she was meeting with some success in her attempts to block him out. At this rate, she might

even be completely caught up to him before the start of the summer break.

Their time was up before long, and the two of them had to get cleaned up before heading down for supper. Hermione was long gone by the time they called it quits. Harry was not certain exactly when she had left, but he knew she had stayed for at least ten or fifteen minutes. By the time Harry and Ginny arrived in the Great Hall, Hermione was already seated at the Gryffindor table with a book propped open in front of her and a fork in one hand. It had been a long time since Harry had sat with Ginny and her friends, so he decided to join them for the meal. Most of their conversation was focused on their upcoming exams, which Harry was removed from but could certainly relate to, having gone through O.W.L.s a year ago.

Harry spent the rest of the evening as well as most of the following two days either revising for exams or working on Portkeys. His training sessions served as a nice break to the monotony of both activities. He had read all the theory he could find on Portkeys. All that was left was for him to practice and master the spell, which basically meant a slew of attempts at casting the spell. He was meeting with some success, but the spell was not as strong as he would like it to be. For one thing, he needed it to last for at least the length of the summer holidays. On top of that, he wanted the Portkey to function for several people at any given moment, in case his students needed to bring family or friends along with them. He had mastered the spell to the point that his Portkeys would all work, but he was not convinced that the spell was strong enough or durable enough for his purposes. Plus, he needed to make sure the Portkeys would work all over the UK, and the further the Portkeys had to take them, the more power they required.

His revisions were monotonous for obvious reasons. It was all material they had covered throughout the year. Granted, he could not remember every minute detail, but he was much more confident going into the exams than he had ever been in his five previous years at Hogwarts. While his marks had never been spectacular, he had always done well in the past. He just wanted to get on with it.

Finally, Sunday arrived, and with it a ball of excitement in the pit of his stomach. He was looking forward to what the day would bring, and he could see on some of the faces in the Great Hall that morning that he was not the only one. His seven advanced BHA members left convention behind as they all huddled together at the end of the Hufflepuff table, presumably discussing battle strategies. Harry noticed more than one pair of curious eyes – and a few malevolent ones – cast in their direction.

Harry could not help the smile that tugged at his lips watching them. For better or worse, he knew he would be seeing them at their absolute best today. He could only hope that they would give him a good fight. His IHA members refrained from anything so dramatic, but Harry could see a gleam in a few of their eyes as the anticipation for the afternoon's activities built. Luckily, Harry did not have to wait as long to get the festivities underway.

He went straight to the Room of Requirement after breakfast. There was a full hour before his lesson with the BHA was set to begin, but he wanted to get a bit of practice in with his training dummies using his wand conventionally, without any wandless magic at all. He was so accustomed to duelling wandlessly all the time, that he did not want to slip up and accidentally showcase his abilities with an audience present.

It was over a half an hour later, while Harry was engaged in a duel against three training dummies, that the door to the Room of Requirement opened and Professor McGonagall walked in. Harry glanced over at the doorway and nearly paid for the moment of distraction. As it was, he just barely ducked out of the way of the stinging hex headed his way before banishing the dummies with a thought and turning to his visitor.

“My apologies,” Professor McGonagall offered. “I did not mean to interrupt.”

Harry shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I just wanted to get a bit of warm-up in.”

His Head of House arched an eyebrow. "You consider a duel against three opponents to be a warm-up? I shudder to think what you would call a normal match."

Harry chuckled lightly. "Well, considering the odds I'll soon be facing. Three on one sounds like child's play."

"Indeed," Minerva replied. "Yet you feel you are up to the task?"

"Only one way to find out," Harry responded noncommittally.

"Tell me, Harry, how much have you been practicing yourself over the year?" Minerva asked suddenly.

Harry gave her an appraising look. "I train on my own pretty regularly. Have to stay ahead of my students, after all."

She nodded her head. "Yet to even think of taking on seven or more at once, you must be quite far ahead of them. You have already defeated seven in a duel once before."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "That was early on in their training. They should put up a much better fight now."

"But you still expect to win, do you not?" she questioned him.

Harry could not help but wonder at her goal in this line of questioning. "I hope to lose, actually," he admitted. "For their sakes, I hope they can beat me."

Her gaze was penetrating, but she did not question him any further. After a moment of silence, Harry spoke again. "I'd like you to set up the scene for our battle, if you don't mind. That way I won't have any prior knowledge to aid me."

"Certainly," she agreed. "Did you have anything in particular in mind?"

Harry shook his head. "Surprise me."

“Very well,” she answered. “And what of the students you are to be fighting?”

“We’ll enter at the same time on opposite ends of the room. Give us about five minutes to become acclimated to the surroundings and to allow them to adjust their plans,” Harry stated.

“And what are to be the rules of this match?”

“Nothing lethal, obviously,” Harry began. “And no healing spells or counter-curses. Whatever you’re hit with, you keep until the end of the match. As soon as you are incapacitated or otherwise unable to participate in the match, you’re out of the match entirely. Beyond that, anything goes. The match is not over until either I am knocked out or their whole team is out.”

McGonagall took all this in and responded with only a curt nod of her head. The door to the room had opened as Harry finished speaking, and the first of his students entered the room. It was not long before the rest of the class filtered in. Professor McGonagall drifted off to the side of the room, away from the crowd of students standing before Harry. When all the students had arrived, Harry stood on the small podium at the front of the room and called his students to attention.

“I have a few announcements to make before we get started,” Harry stated, his voice carrying to every corner of the room without any effort. “First, all lessons following this one will be cancelled until exams are over. We will resume the Sunday following the last day of exams at our normal time. Even though your other classes will all be finished, I expect all of you to be here.”

“For today’s class, I have something special planned. We will not be covering anything new today. In fact, we will not be covering anything at all. Your seven advanced students issued a challenge to me which I have accepted, so today you will watch an exhibition match between those students and myself.” Harry went on to detail the terms of the contest and revealed that Professor McGonagall would be monitoring

the match and would serve as referee should one become necessary. "Now, let's get started. Professor, if you will?"

Professor McGonagall walked briskly to the front of the room and, after a moment's pause, continued on towards a new door that had appeared in the wall. "Harry, you enter at that end," she called, pointing towards another door to the right of the one she was standing at. She then pointed to another door to her left and turned towards his opponents. "You seven at that end. The rest of you can enter here." She opened the door in front of her and ushered the students inside.

With one last look at his Head of House and his seven opponents, Harry opened the door and stepped into what was to be their battleground, a rather dense forest. His mind flashed back to his previous experiences within the Forbidden Forest. This reproduction lacked the eeriness of the real thing, but it was a foreboding setting nonetheless. The darkness made it difficult to see. Harry wondered how McGonagall and the rest of the students would discern the action, but, as they were in the Room of Requirement, perhaps they could see more clearly than Harry or his opponents.

Harry turned around, examining his location in greater detail, and considered different tactics he might employ. He briefly toyed with the idea of levitating himself up to the treetops and attacking from up high but dismissed the idea. He was wary of doing anything too extreme as he ultimately intended this exercise to be for their benefit rather than his own. He wanted this to simulate a confrontation against an actual Death Eater, and no Death Eater would go to those lengths while attacking school children, especially those from unprotected, Muggle families. Their approach would be straightforward as they would not feel the need to prepare for a battle against students.

With that in mind, Harry had his plan set. He would simply advance towards their position and pick them off as he encountered them. He had the added advantage of his ability to sense magic, but he did not want to rely too heavily on it as, to his knowledge, no Death Eaters possessed the ability. Still, it would make it rather hard for the students to use stealth against him.

It was not long before he heard Professor McGonagall's magically amplified voice announce the start of the exhibition. Harry slid his wand into his hand and steeled himself as he began his slow advance. The dead leaves crunched under his feet as he walked forward, his eyes scanning back and forth, looking for any signs of movement. His senses were all alert, but the room simulated a wind which kept an almost constant rustling all around him. He had been walking for what must have been at least a few minutes, moving from tree to tree, before he detected any sign of his adversaries.

Harry could not help but smirk as he recognised their strategy – and how similar it was to his own thoughts. Were it not for his ability to sense magic, he never would have noticed the two students hidden in the treetops as he passed. Harry was cautious now, waiting for the moment when they would strike, but it did not come. He continued to move slowly forward. The two trees in question were several metres apart, and Harry's path took him more or less directly between them. He was on edge as he passed, waiting for the strike to begin, but still they waited. As he took a few more steps, he realised why.

He was walking into an ambush. He picked up three more of his students forming a ring around the area he was now entering. These three were all on the ground rather than in the trees like their comrades. And as Harry continued forward, he picked up on the final two, one in a tree directly in his path and another on the ground just off to the side. He was roughly in the centre of their trap when all hell broke loose.

They struck almost as one as seven spells flew at him from all directions. Thinking quickly, Harry threw a shield in front of him and charged forward out of the paths of five of the seven curses. His shield deflected one curse, while he ducked under the one from the student in the tree directly in front of him. Though Harry could tell the exact position of his opponents thanks to his magical senses, he could not actually see any of them. They were disillusioned.

He sent a quick series of four Stunners in an arc in front of him as if he did not know the actual position of those he was attacking. One of his spells forced his opponent on the ground to shift to the side, and Harry's eyes caught the movement. Before he could act, however, he

sensed another series of spells converging on him, and he glanced over his shoulder just before ducking and rolling out of the way. As he completed his roll, he sent another Stunner to the location of where he had seen movement, but the spell impacted a tree. He knew the student had already relocated, but he wanted to keep up appearances.

Harry remained crouched low to the ground, his eyes constantly scanning all around, waiting for the next move, but his students were displaying an incredible amount of patience. They were content to play the waiting game while they had the advantage. He would be forced to make the next move, but what that move would be was a mystery. Since he did not wish to take advantage of his ability to sense magic, he should have no idea where any of the seven were hiding, so he could not directly attack them. Walking back into the centre of their little ring would be asking for trouble. He was more or less right on the edge of their circle now. His best course of action would be to travel around that edge and hope to catch some trace of one of his students.

OoOoO

Minerva watched eagerly as Harry crept slowly through the gloomy forest. She was immediately impressed, both with Harry's speed and reflexes and with his students' strategy. For a moment she had been certain that the battle would be remarkably short-lived, but Harry had seemed to almost be expecting the ambush, and it was as if he knew just what he needed to do to evade the attack, without having to even see all the spells flying towards him.

She knew roughly where each of the seven BHA students were located, although their Disillusionment Charms made it rather difficult to track them. She wondered, though, how Harry would now face them. It was clear he had entered the fray without any real strategy, though she felt this was a tactical move on his part rather than arrogance. He wanted to give them a fighting chance, but she had no doubts that he would fight with everything he had to emerge the victor.

As Harry continued to work his way around the area of the ambush, she caught the movement of one of his adversaries slowly trying to

edge out of his path. She was sure Harry would notice as well, but he showed no signs of having seen or heard a thing and continued on his path. Just as he was passing by the position of the student in question, Harry struck quite suddenly. In the blink of an eye he had sprung at his victim and unleashed a veritable torrent of spells upon his opponent. The first three spells were absorbed by the student's hastily constructed shield. His comrades all struck at Harry, but none were in a good position to aid their ally.

Harry sidestepped the curses sent his way, never ceasing his spell-fire until his student finally collapsed to what looked like a Disarming Charm, a Jelly-Legs Jinx, and finally a Stunner. He turned back towards the rest of his opponents and effortlessly cast a shield to block the last of the spells zooming towards him. As soon as he had turned, the remaining six students ceased fire and resumed their game of patience. Already she could see that Harry had found the flaw of their strategy. He had to know that a few of their number were in the trees and therefore completely immobile. The ones on the ground appeared to be so committed to their strategy that they were afraid to move – even to come to the aid of their friend. They should have been much more compact for their ambush. They were so far apart that Harry had to be in the centre of their circle in order for all seven combatants to be effective. So long as he remained outside the centre of their trap, he could fight them one or two at a time rather than seven at once.

That was, of course, assuming Harry could find them, which seemed to be proving rather difficult for him. He continued his path along the perimeter of the circle, moving slowly and constantly shifting his head back and forth trying to locate the others. She knew roughly where each of the other six were stationed, but it was difficult to keep tabs on them in their disillusioned states. Just then, though, she noticed a ripple several metres behind Harry. He was being followed.

After a minute, she detected a second figure begin slowly trailing after Harry. It appeared that they too realised that in order to stand a chance, they would need to work closely together. She watched tensely, waiting for the moment when they would strike. Finally, the moment came, and his two stragglers struck in unison with an amplified, "Stupefy."

Before the tips of their wands had even lit with their curses, Harry already sprang into motion, ducking and rolling to the side, jumping quickly back onto his feet and facing his two stalkers with his wand extended. By the time the two Stunners passed by where Harry had been moments before, Harry had already retaliated. His targets dodged his spell-fire, and Harry was prevented from pressing his advantage as three spells came at him from all different directions.

It seemed as if he knew where the spells were coming from without even looking as he spun out of one curse and ducked under another sent from above and behind him before batting away the third with a shield. But by that time more curses were already headed his way, and he had no time to launch into an offensive of his own. His students had given up the game of hiding. Now that they had him surrounded once more, they pressed their advantage. Minerva noticed a blurry ripple of movement streaking through the forest towards them as all pretences of hiding had vanished.

Meanwhile, Harry ducked, dodged, and rolled out of the way of one curse after another. Two students in the trees were within firing range in addition to the three pressing in on him from the ground. He was well and truly outnumbered, yet looking at him, Minerva never thought he was in over his head. He was in constant motion, abandoning the notion of shielding spells, instead using his wand to fire curses whenever he could. Some of the curses were so close that she could not tell whether or not they actually connected with him. If he was ever struck, Harry showed no reaction to it. After a minute without luck against those on the ground, Harry sent two quick spells up into one of the trees. There was a startled “Oof” and the sound of branches snapping as a blurry figure fell from the tree. With a thought from Minerva, the ground underneath the student softened to cushion the landing, and the student immediately fell to a Stunner from Harry.

Another figure raced across the forest towards the commotion. Her Disillusionment Charm appeared to be fading as Minerva could see her with relative clarity. She had been in a tree on the other side of the circle and must have climbed down, realising that she would never be able to participate in the battle from her position. Harry was in a real bind with five of his students surrounding him – four on the

ground, one in a tree. As all five rained curses down upon him, Harry continued to dodge the spells to the best of his ability, only occasionally resorting to using a shield. Suddenly, he raced forward, past a pair of students, Stunning one as he raced by before the student was able to raise a shield.

He darted behind the other, who had become semi-visible, causing the spell-fire from the rest to cease lest they incapacitate their own comrade. Harry began firing curse after curse at his nearby foe, who had erected a shield to block the first and began ducking and dodging to evade the rest. The other two grounded students raced over to get into better positions, but by the time they got a clear shot at Harry, he had already managed to Petrify his opponent.

Minerva sat in awe as she watched the fluidity and grace of Harry's movements. Only once before in her life had she ever seen someone duel like that. As she realised the only other person she had seen capable of moving and fighting like Harry, she felt her blood freeze. It was impossible! She watched in shocked silence as he systematically knocked out the remaining students. The one student left in the tree climbed down while Harry was occupied with the other two. Or at least, that seemed to be the intended strategy. However, Harry must have noticed the action for he managed to Stun the student before he even reached the ground.

That left two, and even their combined strength was no match for Harry. With the ease at which he cast spells, Minerva would not have been surprised if he could have simply held a shield up to block their curses until they had simply tired themselves out and exhausted all their energy, but it did not come to that. Within a minute, one of the two had also fallen, leaving just one left standing. To his credit, the last student did not back down. He gave it everything he had, but it was not enough, and he, too, fell, ending the exhibition.

Minerva was so lost in her own mind that she barely even noticed as the scene before her faded away. The trees disappeared making it easier for Harry to find and revive his students, yet she could do nothing but stand there and gaze unseeingly forward. Her mind was at war, refusing to accept the logical conclusion it had drawn after

watching Harry fight. She was not shaken from her stupor until Harry made his way over to her and asked, "Are you all right, Professor?"

She was startled into awareness, holding a hand to her heart. "What? Yes, yes, I'll be fine. Just feeling a little dizzy is all."

"Do you want me to take you up to the Hospital Wing?" he asked, his voice radiating with concern.

"No, I – I think I just need a bit of fresh air. If you'll excuse me...." And with that, she left. She walked right out of the room and quickly made her way to her office. She sunk down into her chair and leaned forward with her elbows on her desk, resting her head in her hands. Could it be? It had been several months since she had been involved in the battle at Hogsmeade. Could she be making connections where there were none? Was she imagining it? Not for the first time in her life, she wished she had a Pensieve. If she could get an objective view on her memory, perhaps she could make sense of it all.

She rose from her desk, intending to do just that. Albus would not mind allowing her the use of his Pensieve, but he would no doubt want to know for what purpose she needed it. Dare she tell him her suspicions? After all, she had no real proof. Should she really open that can of worms without any evidence? No, there was no sense in that. She sank back down into her chair. She needed to use that Pensieve, but she did not want to air her suspicions just yet – not until she had more to go on, not until she had straightened out her mind.

She knew where he kept the Pensieve in his office. She considered waltzing in and grabbing it, but she did not want to steal it. She just wanted a chance to use it without his knowledge. She would not need much time, only a few minutes. It would have to be a time when Albus was sure to be occupied elsewhere. Glancing down at her watch, she made her decision. It was an odd occurrence for her to miss a meal, but it was not unheard of – particularly around this time of the year. Shortly after the start of lunch, she would simply go into the Headmaster's office and use the Pensieve.

The time crawled by as she waited. She tried to occupy herself, but nothing could hold her attention. No essays or books could keep her mind from wandering back to what she had seen – to what she suspected. There was nothing for it. It was agony, staring at her watch as the seconds ticked past, but time moves ever forward, even if our perception of it changes. Before too long, lunch time came. She was sure Albus would be in the Great Hall. He rarely ever missed a meal if it could be avoided. She was not sure whether it was the opportunity to be amongst the student body or the House Elves' cooking that drew him in, but today it did not matter. All that mattered was that he would be there, leaving his office unattended.

She arrived quickly at the gargoyle, which sprung aside as she gave the password. Riding up the stairs, she realised the one flaw in her plan: the portraits. The fact that she was visiting his office while the Headmaster was absent was not in itself uncommon, but she expected that they would inform him of her use of the Pensieve. That was, of course, assuming they noticed what she was up to. The Pensieve was stored in a cabinet whose doors, when opened, would obstruct the portraits' views of her. So long as she was careful, she could prevent them from seeing her entering the Pensieve, and she could come up with a plausible excuse to give the Headmaster should he ask what she was doing in his office.

Reaching her decision, she pushed open the door and strode purposefully into the office. She immediately made her way to the cabinet in question and opened the doors to a point where they should best hide her activities. Stooping down a bit, she held her wand to her head and extracted the memory of the battle in Hogsmeade and then deposited it into the stone basin. She swirled the contents once with her wand and then dipped a finger inside.

She felt the uncomfortable sensation of falling into the memory and suddenly found herself on the streets of Hogsmeade, spells flying all around her. She ignored the instinct telling her to take cover, knowing that she could not be harmed by the memory. Instead, she turned her attention to the side of the Three Broomsticks just as two jets of red light shot out of the alley and knocked out two Death Eaters.

As Jim walked out of the shadows, Minerva found herself inexplicably drawn closer. She was not aware of her legs moving until she had closed the distance between them in half. He was already a blur of motion, but it was clear that he was fighting a losing battle – until he did something both incredibly brave and foolish. He charged right into the line of Death Eaters, bringing the battle into close proximity. His strategy and his movements were so eerily similar to what she had just seen. When Harry had been confronted with greater numbers, he had engaged them at close range, just like Jim. And the way they both moved, it was as if they were performing a choreographed dance. Were it not for the fact that Jim was fighting Death Eaters and Harry school children, she would have been inclined to say that Harry was the more skilled of the two. But then, if they were one in the same, it would only make sense that after several more months of training, he would become faster and stronger.

Minerva watched as Jim disposed of one Death Eater after another, cringing when she saw him take a pair of Cutting Curses. It was not until after the Death Eaters vanished that she was able to get a good look at him. She was shocked at what she saw. How could she have missed it? His hair and eyes were different, and there was no scar. Everything else about him, however, was exactly the same. How had no one noticed before? Then again, they were not accustomed to seeing a Harry Potter that looked like this. The Harry they all pictured was still the scrawny boy with glasses. He had changed so much this year, and yet she had a feeling they did not even know the half of it.

She lifted herself from the memory and took a moment to steady herself before drawing the memory out of the Pensieve and re-depositing it in her mind. She then shut the cabinet and left the office. Glancing down at her watch she decided to have a quick lunch before going back to the Room of Requirement. She wanted answers, and she would not allow Harry to leave that room until she got them.

OoOoO

Harry was all smiles as he woke all of his fallen IHA students following the battle. There had been a few close calls where he had very nearly been beaten, but he had emerged victorious in the end. Part of him was thrilled at his success. His blood was still pumping

from the excitement of the battles, and he felt like he could take on just about anyone right then. But then another part of him had wanted to see better from his students. He was happy with the progress they had all made over the course of the year, but he could not help thinking that it was nowhere near enough.

In his BHA battle, after the initial ambush failed, his students stood little chance of success until they abandoned their strategy and unleashed an all-out attack, but Harry's experience allowed him to systematically defeat each and every one of them. His battle against the IHA had been much different. They had not had the opportunity to see him in action before and had severely underestimated him. The battle was fairly straightforward. They tried to simply overpower him by attacking en masse. Considering their numerical advantage, it was not a horrible tactic, but it had ultimately failed. Having taught them, he knew which students to target first as they were the easiest to eliminate. Once their numbers started dwindling, Harry was able to focus his attention on the stronger duellists until he finally managed to defeat them all.

He offered a hand down to Blaise who appeared a bit groggy after having just been awoken. The Slytherin took the offered hand and was soon hoisted onto his feet. Harry was impressed with the Slytherin. He fought hard throughout all the battles, and he was actually a gifted duellist. If he continued with the training and built up his agility and endurance, he could be great. "Good match," Harry said as he let go of his hand.

"Easy for you to say since you were the only one left standing," Blaise replied without any real malice.

Harry smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "I warned you that fighting me would not be easy."

"That you did," he replied, a speculative look on his face. He looked as if he wanted to ask something but then thought better of it.

When all the students were up and moving about again, Harry addressed the class as a whole, thanking them all for their hard work

over the year and in the tournament and wished them all luck on their exams. As the students all began to exit the room, he noticed a few headed in his direction. Before the rest of the students had even exited the room, Hermione marched up to him and demanded, "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at her. "Here, mostly. You above all people should have realised that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she questioned.

Before he had a chance to respond, another voice cut in, "Miss Granger, perhaps you can continue this line of questioning at a later time. I would like to have a word with Mr. Potter." Harry looked up to Professor McGonagall gratefully. "Alone," she added unnecessarily.

Hermione looked as if she had just been told exams had been cancelled. It took a moment for her to compose her voice before she answered, "Certainly Professor." Without even a glance at him or any of the others, she turned on her heel and marched out of the room.

Harry's eyes swept over Ginny, Ron, Neville, and Luna as he said, "I'll see you guys later."

Professor McGonagall stood stonily until the door shut behind them. She turned to Harry and said, "Have a seat." Harry half-turned to find a chair behind him. Almost the moment his bum hit the seat, she continued, "You have some explaining to do."

"Er – I do?" Harry answered thickly, having no idea to what she was referring.

"You have a very unique style of fighting, Harry," his Head of House commented, her voice strict and controlled. "One I have only ever witnessed once before in my life. Do you know when that one other time was?"

Harry stared wide-eyed at his professor, the wheels in his mind quickly clicking into place and making connections. He felt frozen, unsure what to say or how to react.

“I’ll tell you,” she stated after a short pause. “It was in Hogsmeade last Halloween. Do you know what happened there, Harry?”

“It was attacked,” Harry offered, finally finding his voice.

“Yes, it was attacked,” she continued. “And it would most likely have been destroyed if not for one person – a person we have spent several months trying to identify and locate. Do you know who that person is?”

Harry did not dare answer that question and instead just stared straight back into his professor’s stony gaze.

Her thin lips separated as they formed a single word. “You.”

“Professor...”

“Imagine my surprise,” her voice cut over his, “when I was watching you in a friendly duel against your students, and I’m forcefully reminded of the battle in Hogsmeade, watching a young man, this Jim, duelling a group of Death Eaters and emerging the victor. Impossible, I thought. There is no way that these two people could be one in the same, so I went up to the Headmaster’s office and borrowed his Pensieve, and wouldn’t you know it, the resemblance is uncanny, once you look past the hair, the eyes, and the scar.”

“Dumbledore knows?” Harry asked, feeling like a weight had just dropped in his stomach. If that was true, he would need to get out of the castle now. His home was ready for him. He would not allow Dumbledore to stop him now.

“No. He does not know,” she stated. “Yet.”

Harry let out a breath he had not even realised he was holding. “Professor – Minerva – please, just let me explain,” he began.

“Yes, Potter. Please do explain,” she said. “I’m quite interested to hear what you have to say for yourself.”

Harry took a deep breath. He knew he had only one chance at this. If he could not convince her to keep his secret until the end of the term, he would have little choice but to leave the school before Dumbledore had a chance to stop him. “How much do you know about the prophecy?” he asked. It all came back to the prophecy, so it was as good a place as any to start.

“I do not know the full contents, but I know enough,” she stated grimly.

“So you know what I must do, then?” Harry asked. He received a firm nod in reply. “I didn’t know, not until last June,” Harry continued. “Imagine my surprise, Professor, when immediately after the death of my godfather, I finally learn why – why my parents were murdered when I was a baby – why I was forced to live with relatives who despise me – why Voldemort has been after me since I was a baby – why Voldemort might want to lure me to the Department of Mysteries. And imagine my surprise after learning this, that I was simply dumped back at my relatives. Dumbledore dumped the burdens of this war and of the entire Wizarding World onto my shoulders and then threw me back to people who hate me. He expects me to just twiddle my thumbs and wait until he deems me ready to become involved in the war.”

“Every aspect of my life for as long as I can remember has been outside of my control. I’m sick of it. I couldn’t just wait around for the next bad thing to happen – for Voldemort to make his next move. I can’t just sit around and wait until Dumbledore decides I’m old enough or trustworthy enough or whatever it is he’s really waiting for. People are dying out there, and I’m the only one who can stop it.”

“But surely you must see...” Minerva began.

“See what?” Harry interrupted. “That I’m too young? Am I, Professor? Am I too young to fight Death Eaters? Am I too young to

face Voldemort? Because I don't think Voldemort gives a damn how young I am. He is not going to stop until I'm dead, and nothing you, the Order, or Dumbledore can do will stop him."

"I understand how you must feel," she said.

"Do you, Professor?" Harry asked, his voice sounding a lot harsher than he had intended. "Do you understand what it feels like to know that one day you'll have to fight Voldemort, and only one of you will survive?"

Her lips pursed tightly as her eyes bored into his. Finally, she answered, "No. I suppose I do not. The only person who could possibly understand is the Headmaster."

Harry smiled grimly. "Yes. He is the only one who can understand, and yet he refuses to. He wants to shield me from it."

"Surely you cannot blame him for that," Minerva cut in.

"Oh, it's an admirable goal, I suppose," Harry replied. "But can he? Can he shield me from it?" Harry's gaze was harsh as he waited for her response.

"No. I suppose not."

"Exactly," Harry answered. "Don't you see, Professor? It's too late for that. Ever since Voldemort returned, it's been too late for it. Voldemort wants me dead, and he will pursue me. Dumbledore has done everything he can to try to stop it, and yet I've already met Voldemort more times than I care to."

"All right, I see your point," she admitted. "But there is a difference between preparing for when trouble finds you and going out and looking for trouble."

Harry nodded, seeing the logic of her observation. "True. I could simply remain in the castle and train on my own."

“Yet you choose to sneak out of the castle and participate in battles against fully trained Death Eaters,” she added.

“I didn’t start with that intention,” Harry stated, thinking about his various encounters with Death Eaters. “Over the summer I had a vision, and I knew the Weasleys were in trouble. I couldn’t get word to the Order quick enough, so I went and ended up saving Ginny. When I went to Hogsmeade on Halloween, I had planned on staying in the shadows and attacking Death Eaters one or two at a time by surprise, but then I saw you pinned down and knew you needed help. Things just kind of spiralled from there.”

“If you think about it, though,” Harry continued, “if I’m to face Voldemort, I need experience. Sure, training here helps, but it’s impossible to simulate a battle against Death Eaters, let alone Voldemort himself. Nobody - not me, you, or Dumbledore - knows when Voldemort will find me again, and none of us can say when the time will come that the prophecy is fulfilled – for better or worse. Personally, I’d rather be as prepared as possible for when that day comes.”

“But why all the secrecy?” she questioned. “It would be safer for all parties involved if you were to work with us rather than on your own.”

Harry laughed humourlessly. “Right. You think Dumbledore would allow that? He won’t even let me know what the Order is up to, let alone actually participate. I’ve tried to get him to loosen up a bit, but he won’t budge. Not until I’m finished with school, as if another year of lessons will really help prepare me for what’s coming.”

He noticed her lips tighten following his statement, but she said nothing in reply. Swallowing thickly, Harry asked the question he was dreading hearing the answer to. “What will you do now?”

She made no move to respond, nor did she show any indication that she had even heard the question. Harry was considering asking her again when she shifted in her seat and asked, “What do you think I should do?”

Harry opened his mouth to tell her exactly what he would like her to do, but he abruptly shut it and paused to think. If he was in her position, what would he do? After a long moment, he finally spoke. "It's hard to say. On the one hand, I obviously see my own point and want you to just keep it all a secret for me. But then you have a responsibility as my professor and Head of House to ensure my safety – and to make sure I'm following school rules."

She nodded her head. "Yes, I do."

"But," Harry continued, "while I'm still a student, I'm also an Assistant Professor, so the same rules that apply to other students don't all apply to me."

"Don't think I'll let you off on a technicality like that," she stated.

"Think about it a second, Professor," Harry replied, holding up a hand. "If things were different – no Voldemort or war or anything – and it was some other student who was made an Assistant Professor, what would the rules be? Would they be allowed off school grounds throughout the year, so long as they were in attendance for all their classes?"

Minerva's lips were so thin following his question that her mouth appeared as just a slit. "I believe there is precedence that states that, yes, you would be allowed to leave the school on a reasonable timeframe. Though to be fair, you are the first underage Assistant Professor, which raises another question." She paused for a moment before continuing. "How is it that you are able to perform magic outside of Hogwarts? And travel so easily?"

Harry cringed, knowing there was no way to escape this question now that it was asked. He only wished he knew what she intended to do with that information, but seeing no way around it, he answered, "I can do wandless magic." Minerva raised an eyebrow in reply, prompting Harry to add, "I'm really good with it."

"How good?" she asked.

“With spells I know, better than with a wand,” Harry stated frankly.

“And spells you are unfamiliar with?” his Head of House inquired.

“I find it easier to learn with a wand,” Harry answered.

“I see,” she responded, neither her voice nor her expression giving away her thoughts. “And how do you move about?”

“I can Apparate – wandlessly,” he admitted.

Minerva scrutinized him for a long moment with her stare. “You must forgive me if I am a bit sceptical,” she finally responded. “Such skill with wandless magic is rare without even taking into account your youth.”

Harry arched an eyebrow and with a wave of his hand conjured a stuffed cat with an uncanny likeness to Minerva’s Animagus form.

Her eyes widened slightly as she surveyed his conjuration and then narrowed as she asked, “How do I know you did not simply have the room create the cat?”

Harry sighed, waving his hand and vanishing the inanimate animal. “Try to Stun me,” he said.

She stared at him for a moment before slowly drawing her wand and levelling it at him. Harry showed no reaction as she began the wand movement and sent the bright red spell at him from close-range. He merely raised a hand and with it a shield, causing the spell to ricochet off to the side.

“Will that be sufficient?” he asked emotionlessly. “Or do you require more of a demonstration?”

“No,” she answered flatly. “That will do for now.”

The two sat in silence for a long few minutes scrutinizing each other. Harry thought she was at least considering his perspective, which

was all he could ask of her. If she still decided to tell Dumbledore, it would be a major inconvenience to him but nothing more. He would simply need to push forward his timetable and leave Hogwarts early. It was not something he wanted to do, but he was prepared to should it become necessary.

Finally, Minerva shifted in her seat and broke the silence. "I find myself in somewhat of a precarious position, Mr. Potter. Your argument certainly has merit and would be sufficient to convince me of your need to be part of the Order of the Phoenix; however, that is not what you are asking of me. I have responsibilities both to this school and to the Order to alert the Headmaster of what I have learned here today, but, if I am not mistaken, that could very well make matters much worse. Tell me, Harry, if I were to tell you that I was going directly to the Headmaster's office to tell him about your abilities, what would you do?"

Harry did not hesitate as he responded, "I'd thank you for at least hearing me out and considering my point of view and let you go." He struggled to maintain a calm, polite tone.

"Let me?" she asked incredulously. Harry only shrugged in response, and she continued, "What you conveniently left out of your answer is what you would do immediately after I exited the room."

"I'd rather not answer that question, actually," he admitted.

She nodded as if expecting his evasion and then asked, "How quickly could you be out of the castle and off school grounds?" she asked.

Harry smirked mischievously. "Faster than you could get to the Headmaster's office – even in your Animagus form."

"Which reminds me," Minerva stated, "I had intended to ask if you wished to study the Animagus transformation next term, but given recent developments, I wonder if you would require my instruction."

Harry shifted slightly in his seat. "Er – not as such, no."

“Care to demonstrate?” she asked innocuously.

Harry sighed and considered it for just a moment before deciding his course of action. Given what she knew, she was no doubt already jumping to the conclusion that his form was a panther, so that was exactly what he would show her. He stood up as he allowed his magic to flow and quickly felt the transformation take over his body until he was standing on all fours in front of his Head of House.

As he reverted back to human form, the professor smirked and commented, “I knew you must be a feline.”

Wishing to steer their conversation back to the matter at hand, Harry commented, “It seems we’ve strayed quite a bit off topic.”

“Indeed, I suppose we have,” she stated. “Allow me to be frank. I am wary of talking to the Headmaster about my findings because I have little doubt that doing so will only serve to further alienate you from the Order in general and both myself and the Headmaster in particular. Would you say that is an accurate assessment?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, I would say so.” A smile began to tug at the corners of his lips.

“However, I am not comfortable turning a blind eye to your activities. What you are doing is both dangerous and foolish.” She held up a hand to stem his objection. “I am not saying you are too young or incapable. Quite the contrary. I have seen what you are capable of and do agree that it is unwise to attempt to keep you out of the war at this point, but I cannot advocate your methodology – going into battle alone is foolish to the point of idiocy.”

“I agree with you,” Harry interrupted quickly. “I’ve had a couple close calls that could most likely have been avoided if I had been working with the Order rather than alone. I had already made the decision to try to avoid charging into battle alone and to work more closely with the Order.”

She pursed her lips. “Not all the Order is eager to trust this Jim.”

Harry nodded. "I had gotten that impression. Remus has been willing to work with me from the start, and I think Tonks is starting to come around. We ended up saving each others' lives in Diagon Alley."

Her countenance turned speculative, and she opened her mouth but then shut it abruptly, shaking her head. "I hope you realise, though, that this is only a temporary solution. Sooner or later, the truth must come out, and sooner is much more likely than later."

"I know," Harry conceded. "I just need a little more time. I promise to talk to Dumbledore at the start of next term if not sooner." He did not like misleading her, but while she seemed to accept the situation as it was, he was uncertain how she would respond to his summer plans and was unwilling to take the risk of telling her. "So does that mean you will keep my secret?" Harry asked hopefully.

With a sigh, she answered, "I have a feeling I may come to regret this, but, yes, I will keep your secret. However, should the Headmaster ask directly, I will not lie. And also, should you do anything particularly foolish, putting your life at risk, I reserve the right to change my mind."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Minerva."

"You are welcome, Harry," she responded. "Now you better get back to your friends; I believe that they too have some questions for you." Harry must not have done a very convincing job of stifling his grimace, for she added, "They do not have any idea, do they? Ron and Hermione, that is."

Frowning, Harry shook his head. "No. I'd trust either one with my life but not with my freedom."

"Is that what you consider this?" she asked. "Freedom?"

Harry studied her face for a moment and saw nothing but honest curiosity. "For the first time," he began, "I feel like I'm actually in control of my own life. It's not just about the war or a sense of responsibility; it's my life, and I'm tired of having it dictated for me."

“Well stated,” she replied, nodding her head. “Very well. For the time being, I shall respect your wishes, and in the future I will do all I can to ensure that you retain your freedom – so long as you treat it responsibly.”

“Thank you,” Harry responded. He smiled at the woman who had long been his professor and Head of House but whom he was considering more and more of a friend. As he walked out of the Room of Requirement, Harry felt as if a huge burden had just been lifted from his shoulders. He could hardly believe the conversation had gone so well. His Head of House had become much more human to him throughout the course of the year, and he could not help but be glad that he had taken this time to really get to know her beyond the face she put on for her students. In class she was so strict and uncompromising, but then again, she was the professor. She was in a position of authority over the class and simply expected her students to respect that. When you took her out of the professorial environment, she was still a strict and stern person but was willing to listen and consider another point of view and compromise. There was no questioning her ability as a teacher, but Harry definitely preferred her outside of class.

His arrival in the Gryffindor common room did not go unnoticed among his circle of friends. Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Ginny all looked up at him as he walked through the portrait hole. Ginny looked relieved to see him while the others mostly appeared eager. Harry took a deep breath before heading over towards them.

Without any preamble, Hermione demanded, “What did you mean that I above all people should know where you learned to fight?”

Harry quirked an eyebrow at her and glanced between the others, “Hey, guys,” he greeted before turning his attention to Hermione. “I think you know exactly what I mean. You’ve been following me around for weeks.”

Hermione's jaw dropped, and after a moment her mouth began moving without any sound emerging. Finally, she managed to sputter, "You knew?" Harry only nodded. "And you did nothing?"

He shrugged. "Why should I do anything? It's not like you were interrupting my work. If you want to waste your time following me around, that's your business."

She glared at him. "Yet you made no move to invite me in or let me know what you were doing."

"Why should I go out of my way to invite you in when you took it upon yourself to spy on me?" Harry questioned, keeping his voice calm as if discussing nothing more significant than the weather.

"I wouldn't have to spy on you if you weren't keeping so many secrets," Hermione shrieked.

Harry glanced around and saw several heads turned their way following her exclamation. He turned his gaze back to Hermione and stared at her pointedly for a moment before responding in a quiet tone, "Did it never occur to you that I might like just a bit of privacy? Or is the Boy-Who-Lived not granted that privilege?"

"Oh, quit acting like you're always the injured party," Hermione ranted. "You've been sneaking around and avoiding our questions all year long, and we're sick of it."

"We?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded forcefully. "Ron agrees with me."

From the look on Ron's face it was quite clear to Harry that he had never made any such claim and wanted to stay as far away from this conversation as possible. Unfortunately for him, he was not given a choice in the matter as Hermione turned to him and asked, "Don't you, Ron?"

Harry looked to Ron curiously, wondering how he would respond to the situation while Hermione glared at him with her foot tapping impatiently. "Er – Well, I do agree that Harry has been keeping to himself a lot this year," he responded slowly, seeming to take care in choosing each word. It was clear that Hermione was not pleased with his response. "Hermione," Ron said as he reached out to grip her hand.

Hermione pulled away as if his touch had burned her skin. "Don't touch me," she scolded and then spun back on Harry, completely missing both the look of hurt and the subsequent look of anger on Ron's face. "You may have intimidated some from asking you questions, but I won't be so easily cowed."

"That much is obvious," Neville muttered, causing Harry to smirk.

Before Hermione could turn her ire on Neville, though, Harry responded, "Yes, I have been a lot more private this year. I've had a lot on my plate, and, frankly, I've needed some time away from you. I know you're used to being privy to every intimate detail of my life, but you're going to have to get used to giving me some privacy because that's not going to change. And frankly, the more you push, the less I feel like sharing. So you can keep on trying to bully me into telling you every little thing in my life, but don't expect me to just cave into your demands."

"Of course you'd turn this back around me," Hermione retorted hotly. "Make me out to be the bad guy while you completely avoid the issue. It only makes it all the more painfully obvious that you're refusing to answer the question."

"Does it look like I'm trying to hide that fact?" Harry asked in return, struggling to suppress his anger and frustration. "Yes, I've been keeping to myself much more lately. No, I don't appreciate you trying to butt into every little facet of my life. Yes, I'm refusing to answer your questions. Why? Because, contrary to what you may think, it's none of your bloody business. You'd think after a year of this something might get through to you, yet you refuse to see reason. You don't get to know every detail of my life. I decide what to share

with you. If and when I'm ready to share something, I'll come to you. Until then, either keep your questions to yourself or bugger off."

Before Hermione could reply, Ginny jumped up and held up a hand. "Just don't, Hermione."

"Of course you would rush to his defence," Hermione muttered loud enough for all to hear.

"All right. I've had enough of this," Neville interrupted. "You," he said, pointing at Hermione, "stop talking." When Hermione opened her mouth, Neville flicked his wand into his hand and cast a Silencing Charm in the blink of an eye. "There. That's much better." Hermione did not appear to agree with that sentiment as her mouth was moving a mile a minute, and Harry had a feeling that, if Hermione had not been silenced, they would be hearing obscenities flying out of her mouth that Harry never thought he would hear coming from Hermione.

Turning his attention to Harry and Ginny, Neville quietly said, "You guys are welcome to all the privacy you want, regardless of what she says."

"Thanks, Neville," Harry stated.

Neville waved his hand. "Don't worry about it. Now, I don't know how long that Silencing Charm will last, and I don't know about you, but I don't particularly want to be around when it's gone."

Harry nodded his head. He could already see Hermione with her wand in hand trying to wordlessly cancel the spell. Sitting next to her, Ron was doing absolutely nothing to help and even appeared to be enjoying Hermione's predicament. Harry was surprised Hermione did not turn to Ron for help. He was certain Ron would probably have removed the spell for her if she only asked. Shrugging the matter off, he turned back to Neville and Ginny. "Want to study in my office?" he asked. "At least there we're guaranteed some privacy."

Ginny immediately agreed, and Neville quickly nodded his own assent. After gathering their books, the three retired to Harry's office

and spent most of the afternoon and evening revising. Harry spent more time helping Neville and Ginny than revising himself, but he was not all that concerned with the exams.

The following week was somewhat tense, though not as bad as it could have been. Hermione avoided any sort of interaction with Harry, Ginny, and Neville. She was so engrossed in her revisions that she barely seemed to spare Ron any attention either. Even at mealtimes, though Ron and Hermione sat together, Harry noticed that Hermione always had a book propped open in front of her. Ron did not appear to hold anything of the confrontation against Harry, Neville, or Ginny. In fact, when Hermione was not around, he acted as if nothing had happened. When Hermione was around, though, he kept his distance, though Harry could tell that Ron did not appear pleased with the arrangement. After all, Hermione spent all her time revising, and Ron was always very easily distracted.

Harry breezed through his exams with relative ease. He could not guarantee Outstandings in all of his subjects, but he knew he had done well enough. Potions was the only exception and that was more due to Snape's bias than Harry's performance on the exam. He was certain he had done well enough on all of his other exams to continue on into seventh year without any trouble. At the end of the week, Ginny had completed five of her eight O.W.L.s with only Care of Magical Creatures, Muggle Studies, and History of Magic remaining. She seemed to be much more relaxed now that she was nearly finished.

Harry had just finished enjoying a delicious lunch prepared by the Hogwarts house elves on that Saturday when he suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He felt three people approaching from behind. Without even having to turn around, he knew who it was. Harry glanced across the table and met Neville's gaze, shaking his head slightly to stop Neville from saying anything. "What do you want, Malfoy?" Harry asked as he turned around to face the Slytherins.

Sneer already in place, Malfoy started, "Can't hide much longer, Potter. Once you come of age, the whole Wizarding World will see just how worthless you are."

Harry smirked. "Well, luckily we're already well aware of how pitiful you are. As for me, I'm not all that concerned with what the Wizarding World thinks. After you've gone from saviour to scapegoat and back again a dozen times, you pretty much stop caring. So why don't you just slither back to the Slytherin table and let us all eat in peace?"

"You think you're so special, don't you, Potter?" Malfoy retorted. "All because of that stupid scar on your forehead. Thought you had defeated the Dark Lord, but we all know how that really turned out. You couldn't defeat him then, and it's only a matter of time before he...."

"Shove off, Malfoy," a familiar voice interrupted.

Harry turned his head and saw Ron approaching from the side. Hermione was not far behind him, a frown on her face.

"Don't worry about it, Ron," Harry stated. Turning back to the platinum-haired Slytherin, Harry continued, "Draco was just leaving."

Malfoy glared at Harry for a long moment. "You'll get yours, Potter. Soon."

"I've been hearing that for six years now," Harry commented airily. "You'll forgive me if the words have lost a bit of their meaning."

With one last sneer, Malfoy spun around and quickly walked away, his two goons lumbering behind him. Harry shook his head and nodded his appreciation to Ron before turning back around. "Well, that was pleasant, as always," he stated. Turning to Ginny, he asked, "Do you want some help revising?"

"Sure," she agreed.

"My office?" Harry asked.

"Do you mind if we go to the library?" Ginny requested. "I think a couple of my friends could use some help as well."

“Sure,” Harry replied. “No problem. You ready?”

“Yeah,” she responded distractedly as she grabbed his goblet and drained the remains of his pumpkin juice. Smacking her lips in an exaggerated fashion, she continued, “I’m ready.”

Harry smirked at her as he leaned in to give her a quick peck on the cheek before rising from the bench. “See you later, Neville,” he said, giving his friend a nod.

“Yeah. Have fun,” he responded.

“Thanks,” Harry said, rolling his eyes rather obviously, earning a quiet chuckle. Turning to Ginny, he held out his arm and said, “Shall we, my Lady?”

“Of course, good Sir,” she replied, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm. Together, they set off to Gryffindor Tower so that Ginny could collect her books before heading over to the library.

OoOoO

While Harry and Ginny were on their way to the library, Hermione had dragged Ron into an unused classroom on the third floor. Ron had a goofy smile on his face in anticipation for what was to come, but the smile quickly slipped off his face as he noticed Hermione’s expression.

“I know you’ve been trying to ignore everything going on with Harry in order to stay on his good side,” she stated matter-of-factly, as if his thoughts were written on his forehead. He was fairly certain they were not. “But this has gone on for quite long enough. I’ve tried playing nice, but he’s clearly out of control, and Professor Dumbledore needs to know it before it goes too far. So, are you with me?”

Ron frowned in confusion. “Wait, so your plan is to go to Dumbledore and tell him what? That Harry is out of control?”

“Yes,” Hermione said, nodding emphatically. She seemed rather pleased. “He’ll know what to do to get through to Harry.”

“And why do you think Harry is out of control?” Ron asked.

“Honestly, Ron,” she huffed. “He’s been training in secret, hiding from all of us – even the professors. They need to know what he’s doing.”

“Er – why?” Ron asked. He really could not understand why she was so obsessed with what Harry was doing all the time. One might think she was infatuated with him, but Harry was with his sister – and Hermione was with him. Wasn’t she?

“You can be so thick sometimes,” Hermione ranted. “What if something was to happen? He could run off to do something stupid, and we wouldn’t be there to stop him.”

“Or help him,” Ron inserted, finding it annoying that she automatically assumed that whatever Harry decided to do, it would be stupid.

“Right,” she absently agreed. “So you agree with me then?”

“What? No!” Ron exclaimed, vigorously shaking his head. “I won’t go behind his back like that.”

“This is Professor Dumbledore we’re talking about,” Hermione insisted. “It’s for Harry’s own good.”

“How is it for Harry’s good?” Ron questioned. “He seems to be doing just fine.”

“Of course he seems fine,” Hermione retorted. “The point is, we don’t really know what’s going on because he’s completely shut us out. Have you ever asked yourself why? Why would he feel the need to keep things from us?” Ron shook his head, unable to answer that

question, but Hermione did not wait for a response. "Unless he was doing something he knew we'd disagree with."

Ron frowned. There was a certain bit of logic to her statement that he could not deny. Why else would he hide anything from them? Why did Harry do anything? He probably thought he was protecting them. Or maybe he felt guilty about getting them involved in the fight against the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries and did not want them to be in danger again. That sounded more like the Harry he knew. But what could he do to convince Harry to let him back in? Going to Dumbledore was definitely out of the question. That would only make things worse. He could see that easily enough. He would think more on it later, but right now he needed to make Hermione see sense.

"That's not Harry at all," Ron countered. "Trust me, going to Dumbledore is only going to make things worse. We can sit down and talk about how to proceed, but you have to agree not to go telling anyone else."

"I don't have to do anything," Hermione shrieked. "And if you knew what was good for you, you'd come with me."

"No." Ron shook his head. "I can't do that." He turned away and walked to the door.

"Where are you going?" Hermione demanded.

Turning his head back over his shoulder, he told her, "To warn Harry."

"Ronald Weasley," Hermione shouted. "If you walk out that door, we are through."

Ron was surprised to find that he was not in the least bit upset at her declaration. "Fine by me."

Without a second thought, he turned back to the door, opened it, and slammed it shut behind him, heading for the library where he heard Harry and Ginny say they were headed following the meal. Seconds

after the library doors came in sight, they were thrown open violently and a figure barrelled out of the room. Ron was shocked to see that the figure was in fact Harry. Holding up his hands, he asked, "What's going on? What's wrong?"

Harry paused and looked at him. Ron would never forget the look he saw in Harry's eyes. "Ginny!" he said. "She was just taken by Portkey."

By the time the words processed in Ron's ears, Harry had already sprinted past him. "What?" he yelled. "Where are you going?"

"To bring her back!"

A/N: Yes, that's the end. All I ask is that you remember that the more you hex me, the longer it will take to get the next update out. Until next time...

Chapter 26: Fight or Flight

Ginny stumbled and fell to her hands and knees as the Portkey dropped her in an unfamiliar room. The voice that greeted her, however, was all too familiar.

“Not who I was expecting,” the haughty voice declared from behind her. “But you will have to do.”

Keeping her arm hidden, she casually flicked her wand from her holster into her hand before standing and turning around. She narrowed her eyes at the platinum-haired man in front of her.

“Tut tut,” he spoke upon seeing her wand in hand. “What do you hope to do with that? I suggest you put it down before you get hurt.”

“Where am I?” Ginny demanded, ignoring the threat. She could not take her eyes off her foe to examine her surroundings, but from what little she had seen, the place appeared quite extravagant.

“Where are my manners?” Lucius asked himself. Sweeping his hand in a wide gesture, he said, “Welcome to my modest summer home.”

Without warning, his wand was in hand and a sickly orange spell was heading her way. Ginny was prepared, however, and had already side-stepped the curse and retaliated with several of her own. Malfoy lazily batted her spells aside and returned with more of his own. Not knowing what most of the spells were, Ginny dodged all she could, leaving her wand-arm free to return fire.

With each spell he cast, Malfoy’s haughty sneer seemed to fade, giving way to his growing anger and frustration. Evidently, he had not anticipated this much resistance. She had no time to celebrate that fact, though, as she was busy fighting for her life. As Malfoy’s frustration continued to mount, his concentration began to lapse. His attention was so focused on the offensive that he failed to react in time to block a Cutting Curse. Lucius bent down to hold a hand to his

injured leg, and Ginny used his distraction to quickly send a Stunner, knocking the elder Malfoy unconscious.

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Ginny walked cautiously towards the downed Death Eater. Remembering a lesson Harry had drilled into her, she Summoned his wand before drawing too close. The wand shot out of Malfoy's limp hand and into Ginny's grasp. She went to break the wand over her knee only to bite back a gasp of pain as the wand did not break. She tenderly rubbed the spot on her leg where the wand had struck. After a moment, she aimed her own wand at it and cast a Cutting Curse through it, cutting the other wand clean in half.

She turned her attention back to Malfoy's prone form and noted a small amount of blood beginning to pool around his leg where she had hit him with the Cutting Curse. She knew no healing charms to stop the bleeding, and she was not about to revive him. She did not think the cut was enough to put him at any serious risk, so, seeing no other options, she decided to leave him there and try to find a way out. If she could make it outdoors, she would use her Animagus abilities to transform into a lioness and make a hasty escape. First she had to find a way out of the building.

There was only one door, so she cautiously approached it. Easing it open, she peeked around the door into a corridor lined with various paintings and tapestries. She was thankful to find it was devoid of anyone. Taking a step back, she pointed her wand at her temple and cast the Disillusionment Charm. She felt a chill run through her body, and when it reached her toes, she knew the charm was in full effect. Breathing deeply, she snuck out into the hallway and quietly closed the door behind her. Looking back and forth, she saw no windows or any indication of which way would lead her to the nearest exit. She chose a direction and slowly crept down the hall in search of a way out.

OoOoO

After rounding the corner, Harry continued to sprint forward and vaulted over the balcony. As he leapt into the air, he transformed and pumped his wings, rising higher and higher. He soared through the

halls towards the Owlery, paying no mind to the few students he passed in the halls. He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt his owl senses kick in, telling him exactly which way he needed to go to get to Ginny. Wherever she was, she was still traceable, and that was a very good sign. Knowing, however, who had most likely taken her, that would not be the case for long. As he entered the Owlery, he beat his wings and flew out of the high windows where the other owls came and went at their leisure, not pausing for even a moment. As he burst out into the night sky, he caught a white blur in his peripheral vision.

Hedwig, Harry mentally called. I'm in a hurry. Ginny's been taken. I have to get her back.

I will fly with you, Hedwig replied.

Nothing more was said. Harry set a brutal pace, not wanting to lose a second. He needed to find Ginny before it was too late. Hedwig, for her part, seemed to understand his need for silence and flew along silently behind him. Every moment felt like an eternity as Harry pushed himself single-mindedly forward. He gave little consideration to what would happen when he found her. He would deal with that when he got there. His only thought was to find Ginny.

On and on he flew. Miles and miles of land passed underneath him, but he took no notice of the distance. His owl senses told him to keep flying forward. The muscles in his wings were numb as he continued to push himself faster and harder, but he never even considered stopping or slowing down. He would not rest until he had found her and brought her to safety.

OoOoO

It took a few seconds for Harry's words to process in Ron's brain, but once they did, he took off at full speed after Harry. As he rounded the corner, his gaze swept up and down the large room with several moving staircases, but Harry was nowhere to be found. After a moment's hesitation, Ron sprinted down the staircase in front of him. If he knew Harry, he was either heading towards the exit or Dumbledore's office.

Choosing quickly, he decided to check the entrance hall first. If Harry was in fact aiming to leave on his own, Ron did not want to miss the opportunity to catch up to him. When he arrived, though, there was no sign of Harry. Panting at the exertion, Ron immediately changed course for the Headmaster's office when a voice brought him to a halt.

"Mr. Weasley, what are you doing?"

Never before had Ron been so happy to hear the sharp tone of his Head of House. Spinning around, he spotted her walking briskly towards him from across the entrance hall. "Pro-fessor," he wheezed, struggling to talk as his lungs gasped for air. "Ginny – she – gone. Harry – after her."

"Breathe, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall admonished. "I can't understand a word of what you are saying."

Ron took a few seconds to breathe deeply before repeating himself. "Ginny was taken, and Harry's gone after her."

The colour drained from the professor's face. "Taken? How?"

Ron shook his head. "I wasn't there. Harry said it was a Portkey."

"And where is Mr. Potter?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes.

Ron unconsciously took a step back. "I don't know. He ran off, and I tried to follow him, but I don't know where he went. He said he was going to bring her back."

"Come with me," she stated, striding past Ron at a brisk pace. "Quickly now."

Ron's long legged strides hurriedly caught up to his Head of House, recognising immediately that she was headed exactly where he intended to go. They shortly arrived outside the entrance to Dumbledore's office. The professor spoke the password, and he followed her onto the staircase right as it began moving. Without

bothering to knock, Professor McGonagall pushed open the door and strode inside, Ron following behind. The Headmaster and his guest both turned to look at the new arrivals.

“Ron!” Hermione called out. “You changed your mind.”

Ron stared at her, dumbfounded. He had no idea what she was talking about, but then, a split second later, his conversation with her came back to him, and he scowled. “No,” he coldly and succinctly replied. Without waiting for a response, he turned to the Headmaster and said, “Ginny’s been taken, and Harry’s gone after her.”

Ron had never seen a look of such utter shock on his Headmaster’s face. Before Dumbledore could regain his composure, Professor McGonagall chimed in. “Mr. Potter apparently believed she was taken by Portkey. Mr. Weasley seems to be the only person with any knowledge of any of the circumstances.”

The Headmaster’s eyes bored into Ron’s. “Where is Harry? Does he know who took your sister?”

“I don’t know what happened,” Ron explained in a rush. “I was going to the library because I knew that’s where Harry was. I needed to talk to him.” His eyes cut quickly to Hermione then back to the Headmaster as he continued. “Harry burst out before I could get there, and just said that she’d been taken by Portkey, and that he was going to bring her back. He ran past me, and I turned and ran after him, but when I turned the corner, I couldn’t see him anywhere. I don’t know where he’s gone.”

“Minerva, alert the Order,” Dumbledore ordered as he stepped around his desk. “Mr. Weasley, do you know where Harry keeps his map of the castle?”

Ron shook his head. “He used to keep it in his trunk, but it’s not in there any more. I think he keeps it with him – either that or in his office.”

Dumbledore frowned a moment before stating, "Search his office. Use 'Phoenix Fire' as the password. If you find it, bring it back here immediately."

Ron nodded his head in understanding and immediately turned to exit the office. Before he could reach the door, however, he heard Professor McGonagall's voice, "Miss Granger, why don't you accompany Mr. Weasley. The two of you will be able to search his office more quickly and thoroughly."

Ron paused only a moment following her statement before continuing out of the office and down the stairs. He was halfway down the hall when Hermione caught up beside him. Ron ignored her presence, staring forward as he walked quickly towards Harry's office. They walked in silence for the majority of their journey. Harry's office door was in sight before Hermione opened her mouth. "I told you this would happen."

Ron glanced to the side and glared at her for a moment before turning back and lengthening his strides to increase his pace.

"I just knew that sooner or later he would do something like this," Hermione muttered loudly enough for him to hear.

Ron halted just in front of the door and turned fully towards Hermione. "Is that all you can think about right now?" he demanded. "That you were right and that Harry's rushed off into danger?" Ron stared coldly at her, daring her to respond. Her hands moved to her hips as she opened her mouth, but Ron cut her off before she could start. "In case you forgot, my sister is out there, and Harry didn't just rush off into danger. He rushed off to rescue her. The only thing I'm angry at Harry about is that he didn't wait around long enough to take me with him."

"But if you had gone with him, no one would have been left to tell Professor Dumbledore what happened," Hermione countered heatedly, but Ron ignored her comment and grunted the password. When the door popped open, he shoved it aside and walked into the office. He had only been inside it a few times, but he was familiar

enough with it. He began at Harry's desk. There were some scattered parchments on the desktop, but the map was not among them. He searched through each of the drawers and came up empty with each one. As he finished the last one, he looked up and found Hermione looking through his bookshelves. Harry could have hidden it in one of the books, but it would take forever to search through each one. They did not have that kind of time.

He whipped out his hand and thrust it upward as he shouted, "Accio Marauder's Map!"

Looking around, he confirmed that nothing had happened. He was not sure if the charm would work on the map, but it had been worth a shot. He checked behind the portrait of the Gryffindor common room, but there was nothing there. He walked up beside Hermione and checked a few books before deciding better of it. "This is hopeless. If it's here, he's obviously hidden it well enough that we won't find it. Let's go back."

He left without waiting to see if she would follow him.

OoOoO

Ginny was convinced she was in some sort of labyrinth. She had been walking around for Merlin only knew how long, and she was no closer to finding an exit than when she started. Every hallway looked the same. Some of the paintings were different, but the portraits were all eerily similar. The Malfoy genes had not changed much at all over the centuries. The uncanny resemblance between the portraits and Lucius made Ginny constantly feel as if she was being followed by the man she had left Stunned and bleeding some time ago.

Ginny had not run into another soul since she had left Malfoy behind, for which she considered herself lucky, but the absence of any other life in this palatial maze served only to make it seem all the more eerie. Every minute that passed made her ever more frantic to find the exit. Her Stunner would not last forever, so she wished she had at least bound him before leaving. If she did not find an exit soon, she might pay dearly for that mistake.

After passing through two more nearly identical corridors, she began to think that the halls she was travelling were all interconnected in one big circle with no discernable way out. She was afraid to try any of the doors, for if people were inside they would know she was there even with the Disillusionment Charm. With time wearing on, however, she felt she had no choice. She came upon a promising door and very lightly gripped the knob, slowly turning it to the side.

It was locked. Pointing her wand at it, she thought the spell, Alohamora. She suppressed a grunt of frustration when nothing happened. Whatever was behind that door, someone had obviously put some advanced locking spell on it, and she had no idea how to break past it without simply trying to blow through the door. She was left with no other choice but to move on.

As she came upon the next door, she slowly turned the knob and felt a wave of relief when she found no resistance. Gently easing the door open, she peered inside. It was a stairwell. She quickly slipped inside and shut the door quietly behind her. Keeping her feet light, she hastily descended the stairs all the way to the bottom floor.

Hoping she had found the ground level, she very slowly opened the door, praying that no one would be on the other side. Luck was with her, for the hallway was empty. Looking both ways, she saw that one way entered into a larger room, so she followed it down to investigate. The room was once again empty, and on one end were a pair of large, ornate double doors. Since there were no windows, she was not convinced she had found her exit, but she held out hope that it might lead her to one.

Creeping to the door, she nudged it open ever so slightly and peered around the side. What she saw made her heart stop. Shakily, she began to ease the door closed when it was suddenly jerked out of her hands. She jumped as the door banged loudly against the wall, and, before she could react, she noticed her Disillusionment Charm had been removed. Ginny stared in horror into a sea of black cloaks and white masks. At the far end of the room, stood the shadow of a man she had hoped never to see again.

OoOoO

With every moment that passed, it became increasingly clearer to Albus that this was going to be a long night. As if two missing students were not enough, he just had the proverbial bombshell dropped in his lap. To think Minerva had known for a full week and saw fit to hide this from him! He could fully understand now why Miss Granger had been so concerned when she approached him earlier that evening. They were not given much time to discuss them, but she had expressed the basis of her concerns. He doubted she could even suspect how accurate those concerns truly were.

Shaking his head, he regarded his long-time friend and colleague over his half-moon spectacles. Objectively, he understood her reasoning for agreeing to keep this from him, but he still could not quite comprehend the decision. With all that was at stake and with all the Order was doing for the war effort, how she could keep such a thing to herself was beyond comprehension. Frowning slightly, he spoke, "While I wish you had alerted me to your findings before now, the past is just that. It is too late to evade the situation, so we must now do all we can to remedy it and bring back our two missing students."

Glancing briefly towards the door, he said, "Speaking of which, I believe Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are about to return." Right on cue the door opened, and the two students in question walked inside. "The map?" Albus asked, though the lack of parchment in either of their hands told him his answer already.

Ronald shook his head. "No. If it was in there, he's hidden it good."

"Indeed," Albus replied. "I imagine he would have. Now, I want the two of you to remain here while Professor McGonagall and I Floo to Headquarters. The Order will be gathering momentarily, and I assure you we will be doing all we can to bring both Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter back safely."

"I'm coming with," Mr. Weasley immediately asserted, to which Miss Granger nodded her head.

Albus frowned as he regarded his two students. "I am sorry. I know how much you are worried about your friends and sister, but Order business is still Order business."

"But she's my sister!" Ron shouted.

"All the more reason to cease your arguing and allow us to do our jobs," his Deputy Headmistress inserted crisply. Her features softened a fraction as she continued, "I understand your concern for Ginny and Harry, but your presence will only hinder us and place them in more danger."

"Indeed," Albus agreed. "You may remain in my office if you wish, and I will make sure news is brought to you as soon as possible." Neither student appeared satisfied with that, but they ceased their arguments. Nodding to his Deputy Headmistress, Albus strode to the fireplace and threw a pinch of Floo Powder into the hearth as he called, "Twelve Grimmauld Place."

OoOoO

"Ginevra Weasley, I presume?" The creature's voice was nothing more than a hiss, yet it carried clearly through the large room and to her ears.

She attempted to make a run for it, but before she could even fully turn away, she found herself frozen in place. "Ah, ah. Running off so soon? We haven't even been properly introduced," Voldemort chastised her as if he was a parent trying to teach his child proper manners. "Though from what I've been told, you've already had that pleasure."

Ginny unconsciously gulped even as she assembled her Occlumency shields into place. Whatever happened to her, she would not allow him the satisfaction of breaking her. She was stronger than she had been with the diary. Voldemort would not see what his diary had done to her, nor would he learn any of Harry's secrets.

Voldemort walked toward the front of his dais. "Do come and join me."

She stood rooted to the spot, but with a raise of Voldemort's hand, her body began moving against her will. It was awkward, as if she was walking in that body for the first time and had not yet grown accustomed to it, but she could do nothing to stop it. The crowd of Death Eaters parted before her, and she jerkily walked up and joined Voldemort on his dais. "Now, perhaps you might tell me why you are here. You are not whom I was expecting. And where is Lucius?"

Ginny allowed a brief smirk to flit across her lips at the memory of what she had done to the man, but Voldemort did not miss the action.

"I see," he stated simply. "Pathetic that a man such as he could not handle a simple child, but no matter. I have you here now, yet you are not whom I wanted. Disappointing, but you shall have to do. Yes," his voice became more animated. "Yes, I think you will do just fine. If I could not have Potter, who better than his girlfriend? Now, let's see what you can tell me about the boy."

Ginny braced herself as she felt Voldemort probe her mind. When he encountered her shields, he immediately lashed out against them, but she held firm. Voldemort was not easily defeated, however, and he continued to batter against her mind. Gritting her teeth, Ginny poured all her concentration into her Occlumency shields, refusing to budge even an inch. They struggled against each other for a long moment before she felt the snake's mind recede. Breathing heavily from the strain, she kept her eyes downcast. Though her shields had held, she had not since her first year felt so violated, and here was the same man who had put her through that attempting to do it again.

"Interesting," the Dark Lord whispered. "Your mind is shielded well, particularly for one so young." His face formed a twisted smile. "But do not fool yourself into thinking you can withstand me, girl. A shielded mind is one with something to hide, and I will learn your secrets. I will break you!"

Ginny forced herself not to react in any way. Gathering her courage she lifted her head and glared defiantly at the self-proclaimed Dark Lord, vowing never to let that happen again. She was only half paying attention to his words as her mind tried to come up with some way out of this situation. She knew she stood no chance with Voldemort right there, but if she could get away from him, she might just stand a chance of escaping the Death Eaters. She tried to surreptitiously tuck her wand back into the holster on her arm. It was charmed to go invisible and be unsummonable when her wand was holstered, so there was a chance they would forget to take it from her.

Unfortunately, Voldemort was too perceptive. "Ah, ah. I will take that." He held his scaly hand out, but Ginny ignored him. Knowing it was useless now, she kept the wand in hand. Before she had a chance to react, however, Voldemort's own wand was in hand. "Imperio!"

A fog descended over Ginny's mind. She felt completely relaxed and at ease, wondering why she would ever feel anything else. It was such a wonderful feeling. There was a pleasant voice telling her to do something. What did it want? A wand? Her wand. It wanted her wand.

She held out her hand, and Voldemort took her wand from her. She did not care. She had no need for a wand anyway, so why should she keep it? All she wanted was to just relax, but the voice was back again. What did it want this time? To tell it about Harry? Ginny smiled. She loved Harry. She could think about him and talk about him all day. But wait. Why did the voice want to know about Harry? Harry liked his privacy. He would not like it if she was talking about him with just anyone. Who was this voice, anyway? And why was it always trying to tell her what to do?

The fog began to lift. Voldemort! She must not tell him a thing.

"Tell me everything you know about Harry Potter," the voice hissed.

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "No!"

Voldemort's eyes appeared to glow a more sinister red. "There is some fight in you, but it is for nothing. Tell me what I need to know

and your death can be quick and painless. But make no mistake about it, you will tell me what I want to know, and then you will beg me to end your life.”

“Go to hell,” Ginny vehemently retorted.

With a derisive sneer, Voldemort waved her comment away. “Hell is for mortals. I am immortal.”

“We both know that’s not true. Not as long as Harry is alive.” She boldly taunted.

Voldemort’s countenance twisted furiously as he shouted, “Crucio!”

Pain. Intense, all-encompassing pain. That was all she knew. Any other thoughts she might have once owned had vacated her mind. All that was left was the stabbing, burning, biting agony shooting through every nerve in her body. And then it was gone. She remained prone on the ground – she had not even noticed when she fell – until a hand gripped her neck and lifted her head. Red orbs glared into her brown eyes, and she felt Voldemort force his way into her mind.

Ginny felt a small part of her stir in response to Voldemort’s presence, a part she had long tried to deny existed. The destruction of Riddle’s diary had freed her from his control, but she had always felt like he had never fully left her. She had always felt some lingering presence of Tom Riddle tainting her. Now she knew, once and for all, that it was true. Steeling her resolve, she quelled the piece that Riddle had left behind and mustered what little energy she had left to expel Voldemort from her mind. With a great effort, she managed to halt his progress and, ever so slowly, began to push him back. Finally, she pushed him out completely, and slumped back down to the ground.

“You will tell me what you know,” Voldemort demanded. “Crucio!”

The pain returned in full force. She lay on the ground, every muscle tensed, twitching and jerking as she endured the tortures of hell on earth. It blocked out everything else until all she knew was that pain, and then it stopped.

“Are you ready to tell me what I want to know?” a hissed voice demanded. He bent down to whisper in her ear, “I can feel that part of you that wants to give in to me. It wants to rejoin its master.”

Ginny could not hide the shudder that went down her spine, but she did her best to ignore his words. She refused to allow him to gain control over her again. She felt him stand up and back away, and then, a moment later, the pain returned. When it halted again, Voldemort once again assaulted her mind. It took even longer for her to push him out. This process repeated two more times, and with each one, she could feel what strength she had leaving her. She knew that at this pace, she would not hold out much longer. He held her under the Cruciatus Curse for even longer this time, and she was sure her body could not take much more. As Voldemort lifted the curse, her body sagged, and Ginny felt nothingness engulf her as she slipped into unconsciousness.

OoOoO

Harry had no conception of time as he continued to fly ever onward. He felt he was beginning to grow near when, quite abruptly, his owl sense failed him. One minute, his sense was telling him that he needed to continue on his present course, and the next moment, nothing. It was as if a blindfold had just been placed over his eyes, and all he could see was darkness. He had forgotten Hedwig was following him until he pulled up and she soared beside him. Hedwig! Can you still find Ginny?

Harry could practically feel her regret as she answered, No, I cannot. She is unreachable.

No! Harry shouted mentally. I'm not giving up.

And so he flew on, following where his senses had last told him to go. All he could do was hope that she was still in the same place. As long as he did not deviate off course, he might still be able to find her. He could use his senses to locate any large concentrations of magic in his path. He just had to hope that would be enough, but as time wore on Harry's hope began to leave him. He had continued on the path

but as of yet had not come across anything magical that he could sense, but he stubbornly continued, refusing to admit defeat. Though he held little hope of finding her that way, he knew that small bit of hope was all he had left.

OoOoO

Albus quickly stepped out of the way as Minerva followed after him. The kitchen was already half full as Order members were arriving in all haste. As they waited for the others to arrive, Albus attempted a tracking spell to locate their missing students. The first, attempted on Miss Weasley, failed to tell him anything. The second, however, performed on Mr. Potter succeeded and pointed Northwest. By this time all the summoned members had gathered, so he called everyone to order to commence the meeting. Albus could barely bear to look at Molly being comforted by Arthur as he outlined the situation. Of course, questions were immediately raised to which he had no answers. "I do not know how Mr. Potter determined that she was taken by Portkey, nor if he even knows where she was taken. Given his actions, however, we must assume that he has some means of finding her."

"It's entirely possible that she was taken with the intention of drawing Harry out of the castle," Minerva inserted. "He may have received some message indicating where she was being held."

"Indeed, we cannot discount that possibility," Albus agreed. "I attempted a tracking charm on Miss Weasley which failed." He had to suppress a wince as Molly sobbed. "I was, however, able to determine that Mr. Potter lies to the Northwest. Without some piece of him – blood, skin, hair – that is as accurate a location as we are going to receive. Our first order of business should be to track down Mr. Potter and bring him back here to learn what he knows. If he does know where Miss Weasley was taken, we can then begin making preparations for how to bring her back."

"What if by the time we reach Harry, he has already made it to where Ginny is being kept?" Remus asked.

“If he has already engaged with Death Eaters, do what you can to protect him and Miss Weasley,” he responded. “There are times to act, and there are times to fall back and strategize. I trust you all to use your best judgment.”

The group that was to search for Harry was quickly assembled in the small lawn behind Headquarters. They all stood with brooms as they prepared to take off. Remus turned and addressed the others. “Is everyone ready?” There were several grunts of affirmation. “All right, I have a read on Harry, so let’s move.”

As Albus watched them take to the air, he could only hope that their mission was a success. He watched for only a moment longer before turning and heading back inside. He immediately walked to the Floo and headed back to his office. Telling both Ron and Hermione of the plans, he added, “Now, I have something I’d like the both of you to do for me. In order for more advanced tracking charms to work, we need some part of both Harry and Ginny. A piece of hair, skin, blood, saliva – any of these will do. I need you to search their things and find some samples for each of them and bring them to me as quickly as you can.”

As the two students hurriedly left his office, Albus turned and met the eyes of his long-time companion. “Fawkes, my friend, I fear I’ve made a grave mistake.”

The phoenix trilled a comforting song.

“Harry may be strong, but I fear he will not be strong enough for this,” Dumbledore said sadly, shaking his head.

Fawkes replied with a short burst of song.

“I wish I had your faith, my friend.”

OoOoO

Just when he was beginning to think that all hope was lost, Harry sensed it. Underneath him was some serious magic. Wards, if he was

not mistaken. Harry felt his heart swell. This was it; it had to be. Circling down lower, he felt as he came upon the edge of a set of wards covering a very large estate. He continued to drift down past the wards, paying careful attention for any sort of fluctuation in the magic, but he sensed nothing. He was not sure if he would feel it if any wards were triggered, but he took the absence of a response as a good sign and began to fly around the large building, looking for a way inside.

Hedwig flew beside him again and, after catching his attention, led him to the entrance for post owls. Once inside the building, Harry reverted back to human form and quickly dug out his trunk, enlarged it, and retrieved his Invisibility Cloak. He re-shrunk his trunk and stuffed it back in his pocket, then took a moment to make sure the cloak covered him well. Turning back to Hedwig he said, Thanks, girl. I need you to find Remus. He can speak the way we do, though he might have trouble hearing you at first. If you can't feel both me and Ginny by the time you reach him, tell him everything you know and show him where we are.

Hedwig hooted her understanding and immediately swept out the window. Turning, Harry steeled himself for what was to come. He did not know where he was let alone the situation he was likely to find, so he needed to be prepared for absolutely anything. There was only one door in the room, so Harry cautiously approached it. Using his magical senses, he determined that there was nobody on the other side. Harry opened the door slowly and stepped into the corridor. Looking back and forth to confirm that it was, in fact, empty, he turned around and quietly shut the door behind him.

He started down the hall, keeping all his senses, particularly his magical senses, on high alert. He had no idea where Ginny was being kept, or even if this was where she was taken. All he could do for now was explore the place and see what he could find. With every door he passed, he paused to ensure that he could not pick up on any people inside.

He was not sure what he would do if he came across anyone. On the one hand, the longer his presence went unnoticed, the better off he was. On the other hand, he wanted to find Ginny as soon as possible.

He might wander around this place for hours without finding her. She might not even be there at all.

Harry resolved to question the first person he could find. Of course, that was easier said than done. If not for how well-maintained the entire manor was, Harry would have sworn it was completely deserted. He did not know how long he walked through the halls, but the time seemed to stretch on and on. He had searched two floors already and had just made it down to ground floor when he felt the magical presence of what could only be a person.

Harry stood close to the wall just outside the stairwell, careful not to make a sound as the figure approached. His target's footsteps echoed in the empty halls, growing louder with each passing moment. As he stood there waiting, Harry could concentrate only on that sound, noticing how the rhythm of the steps was off. When the man finally came into view, Harry's eyes locked immediately onto his platinum blonde hair. Malfoy! After Draco's comments earlier in the day, he should have known. If he found out Draco had any part in this, he would make that ferret pay. As the Death Eater continued to walk towards him, Harry took note of the limp he carried. He wondered idly how the man had sustained such an injury but shook the thought from his head. He held his breath as Malfoy drew near, unwilling to make a sound. As Lucius opened the door to the stairwell, Harry struck.

He never stood a chance as Harry's silent Full-Body Bind struck Malfoy in the back. He followed it immediately with a Silencing Charm to keep the man from alerting anyone of his plight. Malfoy fell forward into the room and, unable to put out his hands to catch himself, landed right on his face. Harry held no sympathy for him. He quickly stepped into the stairwell and dragged Malfoy's body forward fully into the room and attempted to retrieve his wand. As far as he could tell, though, Malfoy was not carrying one. Even his Summoning Charm came up empty.

Turning around, Harry shut the door and cast a quick set of charms over it, locking it and making it Imperturbable. The stairwell was not the best place to do this, but Harry was growing desperate. He took off his Invisibility Cloak and, using his wand, levitated Malfoy and turned him onto his back so that he might see who had so easily

subdued him. Under different circumstances, Harry may have taken pleasure seeing the man's eyes widen in recognition, but, as it was, he held no trace of humour as he surveyed the bloodied face of the Death Eater in front of him.

Making sure to use his wand in front of the Death Eater, Harry took a quick moment to cast a quick privacy ward to ensure their conversation did not carry. He then bound Malfoy tightly before ending both the Full-Body Bind and the Silencing Charm as he demanded, "What have you done with Ginny?"

Malfoy's gloating smirk lost most of its effect due to his precarious position, but it managed to rankle Harry's temper nonetheless. "Worried about your whore, Potter? Surely a piece of trash such as her can be replaced easily."

Harry's wand was levelled at the man's neck without a conscious thought. "Tell me where she is. Now."

"Do you really think you can rescue her?" Malfoy taunted. "You think you can just grab her and waltz out? You'll never make it out of here alive."

Harry regarded the Death Eater with cold eyes. "I snuck in. I can sneak out." Lowering his voice as a deadly calm settled over him, he leaned forward and said, "You have one more chance. Where is Ginny?"

Malfoy laughed openly. "Or else what?" he questioned.

"I take the information by force," Harry stated, meeting his eyes. Without any additional warning, Harry threw his consciousness forward into Malfoy's mind. His initial assault failed to penetrate Malfoy's mental defences, but Harry relentlessly attacked his shields, pushing everything he had into it. Malfoy was obviously an accomplished Occlumens. He managed to fight off Harry's attempts to gain access to his mind, but Harry could sense his anxiety.

He barraged one spot over and over again, trying to call all of Malfoy's attention to stopping him at that point of attack. Then, when he was about to strike his shields again, Harry split his consciousness and attacked in two places simultaneously. The manoeuvre caught Malfoy off guard, and Harry managed to break into his mind. He was assaulted with a barrage of horrifying images, but Harry quickly shunted them away, his visions having prepared him for what he witnessed. With single-minded focus, Harry looked for any memories associated with Ginny in the man's mind. He caught sight of the moment Malfoy slipped Tom Riddle's diary into Ginny's cauldron. Then he watched as Ginny managed to subdue Malfoy during their skirmish. A brief surge of pride welled in him at seeing her best the Death Eater before he finally found what he was looking for.

Malfoy had walked into the meeting room while Ginny was being interrogated. Harry watched in horror as he witnessed Voldemort holding the Cruciatus Curse over her and then attempting to invade her mind. Malfoy began to fight against Harry, attempting to push him from his mind. Despite how sick the memory made him, Harry fought off the Death Eater and continued watching as Ginny fell unconscious. Lucius was tasked with settling her into her new home while Voldemort encouraged his Death Eaters to show her a bit of their unique hospitality, warning them only to keep her alive and her sanity in tact. Not allowing his mind to contemplate what that meant for her, Harry held on with all his strength against Malfoy's attempts to eject him and paid close attention as Ginny was moved from the throne-like room. He struggled against Malfoy as he followed their path all the way to a hidden door. Harry felt a jolt in the memory and was just barely able to hang on long enough to witness the password used to open the door before he was forcefully ejected from Malfoy's mind.

Harry quickly reoriented himself in his body and immediately Stunned Malfoy. Harry positioned the Death Eater's body out of the way and cast the Disillusionment Charm over him. Since he would not be moving at all, the charm should render him completely invisible for some time. Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak back on and slipped into the hallway. It was time to find Ginny and get the hell out of there.

Harry focused on the memory he had forced out of Malfoy as he started down the hallway. After a short way, it opened up into a large

room with a set of double doors on one end, but those doors did not concern Harry. He strode purposefully across the room towards a small, side-door.

When he was about half-way through the room, he stumbled and stifled a gasp as his scar suddenly flared up in pain. Covering the scar with one hand, Harry gritted his teeth and forced himself to carry on. Voldemort was near, and the longer he remained the more opportunities Voldemort had to find him. Harry was never sure how exactly their connection worked, but it was reasonable to guess that if Harry could feel Voldemort's proximity the opposite might also be true.

With that thought, Harry set off at a quicker pace. As he came to the door, he sensed two people on the other side. Bracing himself, he slowly turned the handle and flung the door open, two curses flying from his hands before it even banged against the wall. The two cloaked men turned as one towards the source of noise but were too late to react to the twin Stunners bearing down on them. Both crumpled to the ground.

Harry had closed half the distance between them by the time they fell. He quickly Summoned their wands then bound and Disillusioned their bodies even as he left them lying in the hall. Not sparing either fallen Death Eater another thought, Harry set off at a jog. He could not move too quickly without tripping over his Invisibility Cloak, but he moved as quickly as he could manage without completely abandoning all pretences of stealth.

After two more turns, he came upon his destination. What appeared to be just a blank expanse of wall was actually much more. Even without knowledge of the door's existence, Harry would not have missed it because the concentration of magic in that area was about as subtle to his senses as a flashing neon sign. Were it not for the knowledge he had gained from Malfoy, however, he would not know how to get past the protections concealing the door.

He flicked his wand out of his holster and tapped a precise spot on the wall as he said, "May your blood always run pure." With each word he tapped a different part of the wall. As he spoke the last word, Harry's muscles tensed as he prepared to push through the opening.

Only, the opening never appeared. Instead, Harry witnessed an eruption of magic behind the wall. By reflex, he raised his hand and threw up a shield just as the magic exploded outward and into him. His shield bore the brunt of the assault, but the sheer power behind it knocked Harry back until he crashed against the opposite wall.

The force of the impact left Harry feeling dizzy and disoriented, and he dropped down to one knee to avoid falling. As he shook his head to try to clear the cobwebs, he noticed a high-pitched wail echoing down the halls. Cursing, Harry sprang back to his feet. If no one was aware of his presence before then, they sure would be now. Malfoy must have altered the memory before pushing Harry out of his mind. Whatever the case, Harry needed to get through that door and quickly before he was caught.

He could still clearly sense the magic behind the false wall, but he had no ideas on how to bypass it. Since his cover was already blown, he opted for a direct approach and attempted to blast his way through. Unfortunately, his Blasting Hex seemed to have little effect. After three attempts it was abundantly clear that it would get him nowhere. Frustrated, Harry stepped towards the wall and pressed his palm right in the middle of where the doorway should be. He was not sure if he had imagined it, but he thought he may have felt the magic in the wall react slightly to his hand.

Desperate for a solution, he began to gather his magic. He felt it build up just behind his hand then pulled his arm back. As he jabbed his hand back into the wall, he sent the magic with it. He had no specific spell in mind. All he could think of was just the hope that somehow this would work so that he could get to Ginny. Amazingly, as the magic coursed through his hand and into the wall, he saw part of the doorway flicker into being for a split second. Bolstered, Harry forced more of his magic into the wall in a constant stream. As the doorway began to reappear, Harry took no chances and immediately squeezed through it, not stopping the flow of his magic until he was on the other side.

As he looked around, Harry found himself at the top of a stone stairwell. Without any other options, Harry began his descent, hope beginning to build in his heart. Ginny had to be near.

OoOoO

Every few minutes, Remus recast the tracking charm to make sure they did not deviate from their course and to ensure that Harry was still traceable. He intended to have a very serious talk with Harry once he found him. He may support Harry in his bid for independence, but he was not about to condone his propensity to rush off without first notifying someone and seeking help first. He could certainly understand why Harry had refrained from going to Dumbledore, but Remus had made it abundantly clear to Harry that he would always be there and willing to help in any way he could.

And so was Minerva, apparently. That had caught him completely off guard. While Dumbledore had not gone into specifics, he had stated that the information linking Harry to Jim had come from her, and he rather guessed she had known prior to the very moment Harry disappeared, which meant she had known Harry's secret and chosen to withhold it from Dumbledore and the Order. At least she had until Harry had disappeared on this one-man rescue mission.

Shaking those thoughts from his head, he recast the tracking charm on Harry once again. The results made him pull up sharply on his broom, earning some startled responses from his companions as they swerved to avoid him and were forced to circle back towards him. Frantically, Remus cast the charm a second and third time with the same results.

"What is it, Remus?" Kingsley asked as Tonks pulled up beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Remus looked up and met the Auror's eyes. "The charm stopped working. I've lost him!"

OoOoO

As she began to awaken, one thing registered above all others: pain. Every inch of her body ached, from her fingers to her toes and from her skin to her bones. That she seemed to be lying on coarse stone did nothing to ease her of those aches. Even with such a physical

stimulus, consciousness was slow in returning to her. Her mind was hazy, and it took her a moment to realise that the darkness was due primarily to the fact that her eyes were shut. As her eyelids fluttered open, she discovered that the room was only dimly lit. She found herself lying on her back and slowly turned her head to the side and was surprised to see bars rising from the floor all the way to the ceiling. Just outside those bars stood two men in black cloaks.

That is when her memories came flooding back into her consciousness. She sat up with a start and immediately regretted the move as it only intensified the pain in her body and caused her headache to flare. She lifted a hand to her temple and moaned her discomfort.

“Well, what do you know. The guest of honour’s awake,” one of her captors taunted. “How do you find your quarters?”

Choosing to ignore the jeering question, Ginny looked around her prison. On three sides she was surrounded by stone walls. The ceiling and floor were likewise stone. The last wall was comprised of the bars she had noticed moments prior. It held the only exit from her cell.

“It’s horrible manners to ignore a question,” the man continued after a moment. “Now, guest or no, you should always show good manners. Wouldn’t you say, Roberts?”

“Indeed, I would,” the other replied. “Fact, I’d say the lady needs to be punished, I would.”

“Right you are, my good man,” the first agreed. “Poor manners should never go unpunished.” Drawing his wand out of his pocket, he traced an intricate pattern over the door to her cell, causing it to unlock and swing inward. “Bring that potion, would you, Roberts?” he called over his shoulder. “I prefer ‘em lively.”

“Right,” the other answered. “I got it right here.”

Standing in the door of her cell, the first retrieved the potion from the second and stepped towards her. Ginny crawled backwards away from the man, her muscles protesting the movement. All too soon bumped into the stone wall and huddled into the corner of the room. He slowly approached her and knelt down to her level. Ginny pulled back in disgust as the man demanded, "Open your mouth!"

Ginny turned her head away from him and clamped her mouth shut. Whatever they had in mind, she knew it would not bode well for her. She hated herself for showing such weakness, but she barely had the strength to lift her arms, let alone trying to fight off two Death Eaters. She gasped in pain as he grabbed a fistful of her hair and forcefully yanked her head back. He quickly poured the contents of the goblet down her open mouth, causing Ginny to choke as the potion ran straight down her throat.

Coughing, Ginny tried to spit out as much of the potion as she could, but she had already imbibed more than enough. Surprisingly, she began to feel better as the potion began to take effect. Where her body had felt heavy and sluggish moments before, she began to feel much more normal. The lingering pain was still there, but Ginny felt some of her strength and energy begin to return to her. She was surprised when she felt her hair yanked back a second time, but she did not fight it when more potion was poured down her throat. Whatever this potion was, it appeared to be helping her, and she intended to use that to her advantage.

As she choked on the potion, trying not to lose any of it in her coughing fits, she felt another sharp tug on her hair, forcing Ginny onto her feet. "Now we play," the man leered. She began to turn towards him when something impacted her chest. Before she had even consciously registered that it was the hand of her captor, she jabbed her palm into his stomach and pushed out with her magic to send the man flying into the cell wall. She felt a tug as the man had gripped her blouse. The buttons all down her front popped off and her collar ripped before his grip was lost, leaving Ginny rather exposed. She did not spare a thought to this fact, though, as she noticed her second guard fishing his wand out of his robes.

As the man brought his wand down towards her, Ginny took a quick step forward and concentrated on sending a Stunner through her hand into the Death Eater. The jet of light was a vibrant red as it streaked through the short distance separating them, and the man slumped immediately to the ground. She turned back to the first man to find him lying half-propped against the stone wall, clearly unconscious. Breathing a sigh of relief, she retrieved both men's wands. Stuffing one wand in her back pocket, she held the other in her wand hand and quickly bound both men. She then turned around and approached the door of her cell.

Listening closely, she did not hear anything that would indicate the presence of more guards. Carefully, she peeked out of her cell and peered both ways down the hall. The place appeared to be deserted. She began walking down the cell-lined halls, noting that hers appeared to be the only one occupied at the moment, towards a door she hoped would lead her out of this place. As she approached the door, she heard rapid footsteps on the other side and raised her wand. There was a short pause where she nearly dropped her guard before the door banged open.

OoOoO

Harry sped down the staircase as quickly as he could. When he reached the bottom, he threw the door open. Before it could even hit the wall with a bang, Harry fired off two silent Everberos. One hit its mark, lifting the Death Eater bodily off the ground and sending him back a couple metres. The other bounced off the second Death Eater's hastily conjured shield.

Without missing a beat, Harry cast a Blasting Hex at the ceiling above the man's head. He was forced to duck to the side as a purplish spell flew at him from his opponent's wand, but the falling bits of stone prevented the man from firing another spell, and Harry's hasty Stunner put him out of commission. Harry rushed forward and stepped over the fallen Death Eaters, but his cloak got caught causing him to stumble.

He whipped the cloak off his head and quickly freed it from the stone that was impeding it. Not seeing the point of stealth any more, Harry

bundled the Cloak up and tucked it into his shirt. A quick Sticking Charm, and it was stuck in place, leaving Harry free to continue on his path. Malfoy had ejected Harry out of his mind just after getting through the door to the stairwell, so Harry did not know where she was exactly. He was left with little option but to press forward.

The hallway was rather long. Each of the cells he passed was empty, so Harry continued forward. At the end of the hallway, a door appeared on his right side. He could feel another person on the other side and prepared himself to subdue another Death Eater when he realised that the presence felt familiar. It took but a second for his brain to make the connection, and when it did, he could feel his heart thumping in his chest. He threw the door open in his excitement and rushed through, only to have to quickly dodge to the side as a Stunner nearly caught him unawares.

“Ginny, it’s me,” he called, prepared to spring away from the wall he was clinging to should she send another spell.

“Harry?” Her voice was quiet and uncertain, as if she did not know whether he was real or illusory. She stood rooted to the ground.

“Ginny,” Harry answered softly, taking a few tentative steps towards her before hurriedly closing the distance and wrapping his arms around her. Relief poured through him as he held her in his arms. “I thought I would never find you.” She stood there awkwardly for just a moment before her arms encircled him and she returned the embrace.

“Harry,” she whimpered, and he realised that she was crying.

He held her tightly to his chest, running a hand through her hair and down her back in comfort. “It’s all right,” he whispered to her. “We’re going to out of here.” He squeezed her for a moment before loosening his embrace and taking a step back. Her arms tried to keep him close, but Harry persisted. As he took a moment to look her over, he noticed the state of her blouse, and his eyes immediately narrowed. He opened his mouth to ask her who had done that, but he closed it with a snap. There was no time for revenge right now. “Listen, we don’t have much time before they find us.” Harry fished

into his pockets for a moment before pulling out a small stone. "I don't know if this will work here, but it's worth a shot. This is a Portkey."

Harry held it out so that Ginny could also touch it, but when he activated the Portkey, nothing happened. "Damn." He looked into her eyes. "There must be anti-Portkey wards down here. We have to get out before it will work."

Ginny nodded shakily and visibly composed herself. After a brief moment, she steadily nodded her head and said, "Let's go."

Harry led her back the way he came from, through the door and down the hallway. Before they had even made it halfway, several Death Eaters emerged from the stairs. The distance in combination with the tight hallway made a fight impossible. His spells were all blockable while theirs were not. They would have too much time to react to his spells for them to have any effect. He would not risk losing Ginny here. "Move back," he ordered.

Never taking their eyes off the Death Eaters, they began to back up towards the door leading to Ginny's cell. They were forced to dodge a couple spells, but the Death Eaters seemed content to only push them back. And why not? As far as Harry knew, they were blocking the only exit. Harry followed Ginny back through the door and immediately ushered her into one of the corners right by the door. With hasty instructions to cast a Disillusionment Charm on herself, Harry sprinted twenty metres down the hall and set up a basic illusion of the two of them standing in the middle of the hallway. It was not his best work and would not hold up from a short distance, but it would hopefully draw them into the room.

Sprinting back, he propped himself in the corner opposite Ginny and cast the Disillusionment Charm over himself only moments before the Death Eaters arrived. "Give up while you can," one of them shouted as he walked through the door.

"Yeah, maybe then we'll go easy on you," another added. "Make your deaths quick and painless."

As the fifth and last of the group stepped into the room, Harry held up both hands and targeted two of the cloaked figures. Once they had taken a few more steps into the room, the leader stopped walking and uttered, "What the..."

Harry sent two Blasting Hexes into the group. The two spells impacted the backs of two of the figures, sending them crashing into their comrades. Ginny had just sent what appeared to be a pair of Stunners into the group when he turned and grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

He rushed with Ginny through the door only to find that they had more company. At least a dozen Death Eaters filled the hall, but they made no move to advance upon them. The surge of pain in his scar was his only warning as, to his horror, Voldemort emerged from the stairwell. "So good of you to join us, Harry Potter."

Harry did not stick around to hear what else he had to say. He grabbed Ginny and rushed back into the other hall. A few of the Death Eaters were struggling to their feet. Harry quickly Stunned two of them, but the third was quick enough to block Ginny's Stunner. Harry and Ginny both unleashed a torrent of hexes and curses upon the man until his shield failed and he fell under their combined spellwork. Harry grabbed Ginny and rushed down the hall, searching for any other possible exits. As they reached the end of the hallway, though, they found it to be a dead end. They were trapped.

"What are we going to do?" Ginny asked, the desperation in her voice clear.

Harry looked into her face wishing he could promise her that it would be all right, that they would make it out of this, but he could give her no such assurances. Harry wracked his brain as he tried to think of anything in all his studying and training throughout the course of the year that would get them out of this. He briefly considered trying to charge them in their Animagus forms, but that was entirely too risky. Trying to duel Voldemort at this point, particularly with Ginny there, was out of the question. Harry knew he was not ready to face him, and he knew that Voldemort would not hesitate to use Ginny against him.

As they stood there, Harry noticed the first of the Death Eaters begin to enter into the hallway, so he grabbed Ginny and ushered her into the last cell. He wanted to buy whatever time he could. His mind never stopped running over every conceivable plan to get them out of there, and he dismissed each one the moment it formed. They stood no chance in a fight, yet there was no way to escape.

Harry looked down at the wand in his hand and, in a sudden burst of inspiration, screwed his eyes shut as he called upon every ounce of his concentration. Reaching out with his mind in the same way he would mindspeak, Harry shouted his plea. Fawkes! I need your help!

Opening his eyes, Harry did not see the telltale flash of flames that would announce the arrival of his phoenix friend, and he felt his heart plummet. He squashed the feeling of hopelessness away. If he was to go down, he intended to go down fighting. Harry held Ginny's hand tightly as he raised his wand in preparation. He could hear the footsteps of the Death Eaters approaching.

Turning, he looked deep into Ginny's eyes when he noticed a rather curious sensation. His wand appeared to be heating up. It was noticeably warm and seemed to only become warmer as the seconds ticked by. At the same time, he could feel a build-up of magic in the wand itself without any connection to himself. Harry's eyes widened as he guessed at the implication. He pulled Ginny in close to himself and concentrated on pushing his magic to his wand hand and into his wand, trying to fuel the magic in his wand with his own.

The concentration of magic built rapidly. Flames erupted from the tip of the wand and began to spread down its length, then down to Harry's hand. There was heat there, but it was a comfortable heat that held no pain. It appeared like liquid fire as it quickly engulfed his arm and rapidly spread over his body. Harry held Ginny tightly as he continued to feed the magic, willing it to work, to get them out of there – to take them home. After another moment, the flames consumed them entirely. Just as Harry saw the white mask of a Death Eater peek in front of the cell, the magic erupted, and Harry and Ginny vanished.

Chapter 27: The Return

Severus turned as the door to his office opened. "Shut the door behind you."

The boy did as he was asked and strutted into the office. The action reminded him of James Potter after one of his silly pranks and served to stoke his rising temper. "Sit!" he commanded. His tone would terrify most students but left this particular one unfazed. A superior smirk adorned the boy's face as he lowered himself into the seat.

"Explain yourself."

The brat sneered. "I don't know what you mean."

"Your stunt in the Great Hall," Severus hissed. Playing spy to both sides in the war was difficult enough without foolish school children getting involved and mucking things up.

The boy waved his hand dismissively. "I don't have to answer to you."

"Watch your tone," Severus spat. How he wished he did not have Lucius to contend with, else he would have taught this impudent brat a lesson in manners long ago. "Now just what were you thinking with that foolish display?"

"None of your business," Malfoy retorted.

"I am making it my business," Severus returned, quickly losing what little patience he possessed.

"What do you care?" the boy asked. "Our Lord set me this task - Potter served to him on a silver platter. I've given him what you should have a long time ago, and our Lord will reward me for it."

"Idiot boy!" Severus seethed. "You did not give him Potter but his whore!"

Draco's face paled. "Not Potter?"

“No,” he stated as if talking to a particularly dim-witted child. “And your obvious display in the Great Hall will lead all fingers pointing squarely at you. You act with all the subtlety of a Gryffindor.” The last word was spat with malice.

“But I did as I was told,” the boy whinged. “How was I to know Potter’s bitch would drink from his goblet?”

“Your plan was so full of holes that it’s a wonder you did not wind up kidnapping some house-elf instead,” Severus rebuked. “The Dark Lord does not look kindly upon failure, but, idiotic as you are, you still have some hope.” Draco’s eyes lit up as he waited with bated breath for him to continue. “Potter disappeared from the castle following the girl. Nobody knows where he was headed or how he was travelling.”

Malfoy slumped in his seat. “Thank Merlin; I still have a chance.”

“You’re a fool if you think you have any chance,” Severus hissed. “What do you think Dumbledore will let you just walk out of the school? Even if Potter manages to get himself caught, you’ll be lucky to make it out of this castle.”

“The Dark Lord will come for me,” Malfoy stated.

Severus laughed harshly. “The Dark Lord cares nothing for you, only your worth to him, and with your cover blown and Potter out of the castle, you are worth nothing.”

“You’re lying,” the boy stated. “I’m a Malfoy...”

“And your father has failed the Dark Lord one too many times,” Severus interrupted. “He at least still has some worth, but you? The Dark Lord would use you as punishment for Lucius.”

That seemed to strike a chord as Malfoy’s countenance turned from the proud Pureblood to a scared child. “You can help me,” he said, a pleading quality creeping into his tone.

He must have heard something similar from either his father or the Dark Lord himself to put that level of fear in him. “Why should I help you?” His face was a blank mask, though he was internally pleased.

“Please, I’ll do anything.”

Just the words he wanted to hear. Dumbledore had been on his case about the boy’s situation all year. He feared the boy’s father would not give him a choice in following the Dark Lord, and he wanted Severus to offer him that choice. The old man thought he could save everyone. Severus was not so naïve. The boy had no idea what he was getting himself into, and until he found that out firsthand, he would be all-too-eager to join the Dark Lord. But now he could exploit Malfoy’s vulnerable position to please both sides – if the boy can manage to pull this off.

“Here is what you will do...”

OoOoO

Remus looked from one face to another in frustration. Huddled up in the sky on their brooms, the members of the Order were all at a loss for what to do, and this ceaseless arguing was getting them nowhere.

“Even if we continued on our current course,” Remus stated, “chances are we would never find Harry. As much as I hate to say it, continuing this search right now is futile. The best thing to do is to regroup at Headquarters and try to find some more information, come up with a different strategy.”

No one was pleased with his words, himself included, but it was the only sensible option available to them. Heads nodded reluctantly, and they quickly decided to meet back up at Grimmauld Place. As the group was preparing to Apparate, a white blur in the distance caught Remus’s eye.

“Hold on a second,” he said to the others. “I think that might be Hedwig.”

The heads all turned as one to where Remus was looking. And as the white flier became more distinct, it was clear that Remus was correct. Flying towards her, Remus held hope that Harry had included a letter letting them know his situation, his location, something - anything - for them to go off of, but as he drew near the owl, he quickly noticed the lack of parchment and felt his heart sink. Nevertheless, Hedwig flew right up to him as though she held a delivery.

When Remus neglected to hold out an arm, the owl perched on the shaft of his broom and surveyed him with an intense and intelligent gaze. Remus stared right back wondering what secrets the owl held. He was dimly aware of the other Order members gathering around him, but he kept his attention fixed solely on Hedwig's amber eyes. After a minute of staring, Hedwig hooted loudly and flapped her wings in what appeared to be agitation, though she remained perched on his broom. Remus frowned at the bird.

“Maybe she's trying to tell you something?” Tonks asked in a dubious voice, clearly doubting her own suggestion.

It was all Remus needed for the gears in his mind to click into place. Hedwig was trying to tell him something. Harry had informed him that he learned of his ability to mindspeak from talking to Hedwig. That meant, she actually could tell him what she knew, if only he could understand her, but he had only ever used the ability in werewolf form. Furrowing his brow in concentration, Remus refocused solely on Hedwig, staring into her eyes with such intensity as if the secrets of the universe were locked away in the amber orbs.

When her voice finally permeated into his mind, Remus was treated to a string of words he never thought he would hear from an owl. Suppressing the wince at her colourful language, he tentatively attempted to speak to her. Hedwig?

Finally! Hedwig proclaimed, her voice laced with irritation. You must hurry. My Human Harry instructed me to lead you to him.

You know where he is? Remus questioned. How?

He could swear he heard a huff of annoyance. I flew with him to find his Ginny. He's asked me to bring you if they have not yet escaped. I can no longer sense him, so I can only assume he is with his Ginny, for good or bad.

Remus swallowed his other questions and said, Well, lead the way.

Hedwig took off from his broom and began flying back where she came from. Remus turned towards the others who were all staring at him in wonder. "I can't be sure, but I think she wants to lead us to Harry."

Without another word, Remus leaned forward on his broom and shot off after the bird. In the distance he heard a shout of, "Remus, wait!"

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the others flying to catch up to him with Tonks in the lead. He nodded his head to her and then turned his attention back to Hedwig. Maybe it was not too late. A short time later, Hedwig pulled up, and Remus was surprised to have so quickly reached their destination. She turned around and flew back towards him, and he caught her words, He is home, and he has brought his Ginny with him. They are safe.

Remus felt his stomach unclench and an enormous weight lift off his shoulders. They were safe. He did not know how Harry had pulled it off, nor was he happy with him at the moment, but for now, Remus cared only for the fact that both Harry and Ginny were safe. With her message conveyed, Hedwig began a leisurely flight to the Southeast, presumably to Harry's house.

"What's going on, Remus?" Kingsley asked. "I thought the owl was going to lead us to Harry."

He turned to the Auror and shrugged his shoulders as if he had no idea what was going on. "Damned if I know, but she clearly seems to know something we don't." Turning and quickly surveying each of their faces, he added, "She was clearly agitated and in a hurry before, but she seems fine now and is content to take a more leisurely pace in the opposite direction. If she does in fact know where Harry is, I'd say she thinks he's safe now."

“That bird’s mad as a hatter!” Mad-Eye scoffed. He brandished his wand and attempted the Tracking Charm only to be met with failure. “I say we stick to the original plan and Apparate to Headquarters to regroup and formulate a new strategy. We’ve already wasted enough time following that mad owl. Hopefully Albus will have new intelligence.”

As much as Remus wanted to tell the others to go on without him so that he could go and check up on Harry for himself, he knew he needed to maintain his cover with the others. Nodding his head, he said, “Agreed.”

Mad-Eye turned to survey the others to make sure everyone understood the order before disappearing with a crack. The others began to follow, and he was about to Disapparate himself when he felt a hand grip his arm. Turning, he found Tonks giving him a strange look. When the last of the Order had Disapparated, leaving them alone, she let go of his arm and asked, “What’s going on, Remus?”

“What do you mean?” he asked evasively.

“A few minutes ago, you were as tense and worried as I’ve ever seen you,” she replied. “Now you just look relieved. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you know something the rest of us don’t.”

Remus met her eyes for a long moment before he nodded his head. He knew that lying to her was pointless. “Harry and Ginny are safe,” he stated simply.

“How do you know?” she demanded. “And if they’re safe, where are they?”

Remus shook his head. “I can’t answer those questions.” When she drew herself up to protest, he hastily added, “They are not my secrets to tell. I’m sorry.”

She glared at him in silence for a long moment before asking, “How long have you known?”

“A few months,” he answered, silently pleading with her to understand why he had kept this from her.

“So all this time you knew it was Harry?”

Remus nodded his head. “Well, I was not certain until St. Mungo’s.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Tonks asked, her anger giving way. “I would’ve kept the secret.”

Remus frowned and drifted forward until he could cover her hand with his. “I wanted to. I hated keeping this from you, but they are Harry’s secrets, not mine. He placed his trust in me, and that is not something I ever intend to take for granted.” Seeing the look of hurt on her face, he added, “Listen, when things calm down, I’ll talk to him. I don’t know what he plans on telling Albus and the Order, but I’m sure, if you’re willing to promise to keep his secrets, that he’ll trust you. If I’m not mistaken, he’ll be relieved you know who he is now. Harry is very fond of you, and I think he was disappointed that you disliked Jim.”

She cracked a small grin at him, and he let out a breath he had not realised he had been holding. Gently squeezing her hands, he softly said, “Thanks for understanding.”

She shook her head and smirked at him. “No, you were right; I probably would have done the same had he asked me. Come on Wolfie, we better follow the others before they wonder what’s keeping us.”

He pulled away his hand, and she gave him one last look before Disapparating with a crack. Remus turned in the direction Hedwig had left in his keen eyes locating the white speck in the distance. His eyes rested on her for just a moment before he followed Tonks, Apparating to number twelve Grimmauld Place.

OoOoO

Harry shut his eyes tightly as the flames fully engulfed him. Even though the flames did not burn him, there was something altogether disconcerting about staring into flames that were literally covering your eyes. As the light beyond his eyelids dimmed, he chanced opening his eyes and was marginally surprised to find himself in the master bedroom of his new home. Granted, that was where he had wanted to go, but he had assumed that Fawkes would be in control of their destination. He greatly preferred the privacy of his home as opposed to say Grimmauld Place or the Headmaster's office where they would no doubt be immediately inundated with a barrage of questions that neither he nor Ginny would be in the mood to answer.

Ginny continued to cling tightly to him, and he guessed that she had not yet fully realised the change in their location. Running a hand in her hair he urged her, "Open your eyes. We're safe now."

The room was barely lit by the moonlight shining in the windows, so, with a slight gesture with his finger, he turned on the electric overhead light. The light flickered a moment before turning on, and he could feel Ginny tense at the change. When she took in her surroundings, however, her entire body sagged in relief, and Harry quickly tightened his hold on her to prevent her from slumping onto the ground. He felt her head lift off his chest as she began to fully take in their surroundings. "Where are we?" she asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Home," he answered. "My home, that is."

"How – how did we get here?" she asked, her voice beginning to return to normal. "You said there were wards."

"There are wards," he responded, giving her a light squeeze. "Fawkes brought us here."

"Fawkes?" she questioned with a note of alarm in her voice. She took a step back from him, and Harry reluctantly released her from his hold. "But if he can get here, that means he could bring Dumbledore here, right?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure, but I wouldn't worry about it. If Fawkes wanted Dumbledore to find me out, he would have done so before now. I don't think he would bring Dumbledore here unless I was in serious danger."

Ginny nodded absently in acceptance of his explanation. For the first time, Harry really took in the state she was in. More than anything else, her ripped blouse stood out prominently. Frowning, Harry burned with the desire to ask her who had done it, but he felt that asking her to relive the experience would be rather selfish of him. Instead, he stepped towards her and reached his hand out to grip the edge of the material. He could see the buttons were all torn off. Rather than conjure a whole bunch of new buttons and attempt to reattach them, he simply began to mend the two sides together.

Ginny nearly jumped out of her skin when he began, causing Harry to stop and look into her wide, panicked eyes. Internally, Harry was seething in anger as his mind filled in various scenarios for how her blouse was torn, and he burned for the chance to find the Death Eater that did it and make him pay. One look into Ginny's eyes, however, and Harry's anger died away, replaced with concern. The Death Eater could wait. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Just thought you might like to have this fixed up a bit."

She nodded her head, turning her gaze to the side and refusing to meet Harry's eyes. Suppressing his desire to take her back into his arms to comfort her, Harry quickly finished the job, mending the two sides all the way up a little past her chest, knowing she usually preferred to leave a couple buttons undone for comfort.

When he had finished, he barely heard her mumbled, "Thanks."

Harry nodded, though she did not see it as her gaze was still averted. Taking another step closer, Harry ran his hand through her hair, letting the hand rest comfortably on her back. Ginny allowed herself to be pulled into his loose embrace, and they stood there that way for a long moment. Harry could only imagine what she must be feeling now. His brain was working a mile a minute trying to come up with some way to offer her comfort, but he came up empty.

They stood that way for a long time before Harry finally asked, "Do you need anything? Are you hurt at all?"

She shook her head against his chest, and Harry squeezed her a little tighter. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked in a whisper. Again she shook her head. After another long moment, he finally suggested, "You should get some rest, Ginny."

His statement only caused her to hold onto him more tightly. "It's okay," he whispered to her. "I'm not going anywhere. We'll lie down together." She did not reply, but she did not resist when he led her to the bed. Very carefully, Harry drew her onto the bed with him, never letting Ginny out of his embrace. Harry was not sure exactly when it happened, but he soon noticed that Ginny had begun quietly crying against his chest.

For a long time he lay there with nothing but the sound of Ginny's muffled sobs breaking the silence. Any comforting words that came to mind sounded hollow to Harry, so he simply held Ginny tightly against his chest as she worked through her demons. When her tears began to subside, Ginny started in a shaky voice, "He tried to enter my mind. I f-fought him off, but he wouldn't stop. He t-tortured me and forced himself into my mind." Harry felt her body shudder, and he held her tightly as he rubbed soothing circles on her back even as he seethed in his mind at the thought of the torture she must have been put through.

"I tried to push him out, but it kept getting harder and harder," she admitted with a choked sob. "When he was inside, I could feel him – Tom – stir. He's still inside me." He could feel her fight against the tears as she struggled to continue. "He never left me, even after you destroyed the diary."

Harry stilled at this admission, his hand that had been rubbing her back stopped as he held her to him. What did it mean? He thought he had ended Tom's influence on Ginny once and for all when he destroyed the diary. Had she really gone the past few years with that lingering presence of Tom inside her without anyone noticing?

“I feel so d-dirty,” she whispered so softly that Harry barely caught the words.

He pulled her more tightly against his chest as her quiet sobs resumed. “Shh,” he comforted. “You’re not dirty. You were never dirty.” His mind was working a mile a minute as he processed this new bit of information, but he knew that explanations would have to come later. Right now, the most important thing was giving Ginny the comfort she needed. “You’re the most wonderful person that I know,” he told her. He needed her to know what she meant to him. He screwed his eyes shut as he gathered his courage. “You won’t go through any of this alone. I promise you. I – I love you, Ginny.”

He felt as well as heard her breath catch. Harry was overcome with emotions as he held Ginny against his chest. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that his words were true, that he loved Ginny with all his heart. “I love you, and I’ll always be with you. You’ll never be alone. I promise.” Silently, he made another vow to her that he would help her through this and that he would make sure she never felt dirty again.

Unseen by either, a soft golden glow enveloped the couple, and, as the events of the day caught up with their bodies, the two slowly drifted off to sleep.

OoOoO

Albus sat alone in his office, having just returned from yet another meeting with the Order. He was unsure how to take this latest news. Albus was aware of Harry’s close relationship with his owl, and if Hedwig went from agitated to calm in a matter of moments as they said, it was likely that Harry was safe – and probably Ginny as well. However, if they were safe, their whereabouts were still unknown. His advanced tracking charms had failed prior to the meeting. He had returned to his office with the hope that the charms would now work. They did not. Wherever the two were, they remained untraceable. This brought him no comfort and only served to add to his mounting headache.

Fawkes trilled a comforting note, and in it held the promise that his students were safe. He rose from his chair and showed his appreciation to his loyal companion, scratching behind his neck just where he knew Fawkes liked it. His hand froze when, a moment later, green flames sprang to life in his fireplace. "Albus," called a voice he immediately recognised as belonging to Arthur Weasley.

Walking in front of the fireplace, Albus answered, "Arthur. What is it? Have you heard from them?"

"No," Arthur said, shaking his head sadly. "We haven't heard anything, but Ginny's hand has moved on the clock. It's the strangest thing," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"What is strange, Arthur?" Albus questioned.

"Well, when we first noticed the change, it pointed to Unknown," Arthur explained. "We were relieved, of course, that it no longer read Mortal Peril, but it was only a small comfort."

"Understandable," Albus interjected, wondering where this was going.

"But now, this is the strange thing. While we were watching the clock, trying to figure out what Unknown might mean, her hand moved again. Only this time, it came to rest on Home." He paused a moment and shook his head. "We tore the Burrow apart looking for her, but she's not here," he added in a defeated tone.

"That is curious, indeed," Albus replied absently as his mind turned over this latest sequence of events. He eyed Arthur for a long moment, noting how the Weasley patriarch appeared emotionally exhausted. "I fear we will not know precisely what this means until our wayward students have returned. For now, though, I think we can rest easy that she is, in fact, safe for the time being. We will, however, continue our efforts to find both her and Mr. Potter."

"Thank you, Albus," Arthur stated. "We really appreciate everything you've done..."

“You need not mention it, Arthur, but you are very welcome all the same. I know this has been a trying evening. You and Molly should try to get some rest,” Albus suggested.

Arthur frowned. “I don’t think sleep will come so easily.”

“I understand,” he replied with a nod of his head.

“Good evening, Albus,” Arthur said.

Albus regarded the Weasley patriarch with a fond smile. Arthur’s head disappeared from the fire a moment later, and Albus turned back to Fawkes. “Why do I get the feeling that you know a lot more about these events than you’ve told me?” he asked the phoenix. An amused trill was the only response he received.

OoOoO

“You were a fool to think you could escape me, Ginevra.”

Ginny turned and ran in a desperate attempt to get away from her tormentor, but as she turned, she found herself face to face with him, his handsome features marred by his sneer. Before her stood the young man whom she had once considered her only true friend, Tom Riddle.

“Run all you like,” Tom mocked. “I am a part of you. Wherever you go, there I am.”

She could not help the whimper that escaped her. She knew his words were true. Nothing she could do would ever free her of him. When she had given herself to his diary, she had given Tom a place inside of her.

“You are not welcome here, Tom,” another voice bellowed. She would know that voice anywhere. She spun around to see him approaching from behind.

“Potter.” Tom spat the name as if his mouth was offended to form the word. “How did it feel to learn that I still reside in your precious girlfriend – that she still belongs to me? How does it feel to know that she is damaged goods?”

“The only damage is your continuing presence, a problem I intend to rectify,” Harry calmly countered.

Ginny moved towards Harry, but Tom grasped her arm and pulled her sharply back, wrapping his arm around her waist to trap her against him. “I don’t think so, Potter. While you ignored her very existence, little Ginny Weasley poured her heart out to me, offering me her very soul.” Ginny shuttered in disgust as he trailed a finger down her cheek. “She is mine.”

Ginny struggled against Tom’s hold as Harry answered, “Not anymore.” Turning his attention to Ginny, Harry encouraged, “Don’t let him control you, Ginny. You’re stronger than he is. You can defeat him.”

Ginny shook her head as she continued to wrestle with Tom. “I can’t!” she screamed at him. “He’s too strong.”

“He is only as strong as you let him be,” Harry responded. “Don’t give into him, Ginny. His strength comes from your insecurity and uncertainty. You need to be strong. Stand up to him.”

“I can’t do it alone,” she called out to him desperately.

“You’re not alone,” Harry replied. “I’m with you now. We’ll do it together.”

Ginny felt tears brimming in her eyes at Harry’s simple statement. She heard the determination and honesty in his voice and knew that she would not fight this battle alone. “Together,” she agreed.

With a new surge of confidence she turned back to face the young man who had long been the source of her nightmares. She saw fear

in his eyes. Bolstered, she ripped her arm away from him and stated, "It's time for you to go, Tom."

OoOoO

Harry slowly blinked open his eyes and immediately squinted against the bright sunlight shining in through the window. It took a moment for his mind to catch up with the previous night's events as he noticed the sleeping girl in his arms. Ginny. He was a bit surprised to find the sun up. Between the two of them, he expected one of them to have woken the other with nightmares or, in his case, a vision. Nevertheless, he was not about to question his luck.

He gazed at Ginny's face, buried in his shoulder and felt his heart clench. He had nearly lost her last night. She had told him a little about her time there, and Harry wondered how she would feel today after everything she had gone through. She had been in shock last night. He hoped she was able to gain some semblance of normalcy, but he was not holding his breath. He hardly expected her to bounce back from this as if nothing had happened.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to her forehead as he gave her a light squeeze. She burrowed in closer to him with a small smile on her relaxed face. However she might react when she woke up, at least she was at peace in her dreams, and he could not deny the warm pleasure of having her cuddled up so close to him.

He looked around the room and immediately regretted the action. He had spotted the bathroom door, and thinking of the bathroom only brought forward a rather urgent need to relieve himself. That created a bit of a predicament with Ginny. She was half lying on top of him and had her arms wrapped around him. Extricating himself from her without waking her from her peaceful slumber would no doubt be difficult to manage, but he really had to go badly. He realised that he had not actually been to the bathroom since well before he had left Hogwarts the previous night. That had to be well over twelve hours ago by now.

He gently and carefully rolled slightly towards Ginny. The action caused Ginny's body to slowly droop down onto the bed and off his

body. He pushed a pillow in under her chin as he pulled his shoulder out from underneath her. Finally freed of her, Harry lifted himself off the bed and took a step towards the bathroom. He felt an inexplicable need to jump right back into the bed with Ginny, but he fought off the urge. He really needed to use the loo.

He quickly took care of that need and entered back into the room. She was still sleeping soundly. He could not help but smile at her, nor could he help the urge to rejoin her. He very carefully crawled back into the bed and lay down beside her. He reached out and traced a finger down her arm. She shivered at the action, and he felt that odd feeling lessen within him.

He inched his way closer to her until their bodies were centimetres apart. He let his head rest on the pillow directly in front of hers where he could watch her sleeping face, and he wrapped an arm around her back. The bit of tension that had overtaken his body when he left the bed vanished completely, and he let out a contented sigh. His smile grew as Ginny unconsciously cuddled closer to him. One of her legs became intertwined with his, and she threw an arm around him.

Their faces were maybe an inch apart, and Harry could not help his eyes from dipping down to stare at her lips. They were parted just slightly as if daring him to kiss her. Not entirely cognizant of his actions, Harry leaned forward slightly and very lightly pressed his lips to hers. Ginny let out a small sigh of contentment, and Harry grinned. Everything would be all right. He could feel it.

He lay there with her for a long time – he was not sure how long – just holding her in his arms and watching her sleep. He would have stayed that way all day if given the option, but Ginny eventually began to rouse from her sleep. As her eyelids began to flutter open, Harry kissed her on her forehead and murmured, “Good morning, Gin.”

Ginny groggily mumbled a reply that did not sound English to Harry’s ears and burrowed even closer to Harry, pressing the entire length of her body against him. He attempted to suppress the rush of heat to his face as he realised that their closeness would make Ginny all-too-aware of the effect her body was having on him, but in her sleepy

state, she either did not notice or did not care. "Don' wanna ge'up," she muttered sleepily into his shoulder.

Harry smiled down at her. Kissing the top of her head, he softly responded, "We can stay in bed as long as you like."

"Good," she replied, letting out a contented sigh. For a long moment they simply lay there together until Ginny lifted her head off his shoulder. "Harry?" she asked, a hint of anxiousness creeping into her tone.

"Yes?"

"My parents and brothers, do they know what happened last night?" He could tell from her voice that she was both fully awake and not looking forward to his answer.

"Er – probably, yeah," Harry replied uncertainly. As he went over the details of the previous night in his mind, he continued, "I told Ron you were kidnapped on my way out of the castle."

Her head dropped back down to his shoulder as she emitted a groan. "They're probably going spare worrying by now," she said a moment later.

"Probably," Harry agreed with a slight frown. "I sent Hedwig to Remus last night. Assuming she managed to get through to him, Remus at least should know that we're all right." Harry's mind drifted to her parents for a moment as he imagined her mum's reaction to her disappearance. She probably did not get any sleep as she stared at her special clock all night. The clock! "Your mum's clock," he began a moment later. "That should let them know you're okay, right?"

Her head popped back up at his last statement. "You're right. I hadn't thought of that." Shaking her head slowly, a frown marred her face. "Won't matter much to Mum though. Unless she knows exactly where I am, she'll worry."

“Does that mean you want to go back?” Harry asked, surprised at how much he dreaded hearing her answer. After the fear and panic of the previous night, he desired nothing more than to spend a quiet day at home with Ginny, just the two of them.

“I don’t want to, no,” Ginny replied. “But it’s not fair to keep everyone waiting.”

“I think that given the circumstances, you deserve a bit of time before having to face everyone,” Harry stated.

His eyes were drawn to Ginny’s lower lip as she captured it between her teeth. When she freed her lip and started speaking, it took Harry’s brain a moment to catch up to her words. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to stay here a little while, then?” she said hopefully, her voice lilting into a question at the very end.

Harry smiled. “No, it won’t.”

She tilted her head up towards his and captured his lips in hers. They kissed for only a short moment before the sound of her stomach growling broke them apart with a snort of laughter.

“Right,” Harry said. “If I didn’t know any better I would say you were Ron.”

“Doesn’t say much for you considering what we were just doing,” Ginny retorted.

Harry made a disgusted face eliciting Ginny’s laughter. “Breakfast?” he asked. When Ginny nodded, he continued, “What would you like?”

“Do you have bacon and eggs?” she asked hopefully.

“I don’t have anything right now,” Harry told her with a frown. “Didn’t think I’d need any food until term ended. There’s a shop just a block down, though. Bacon and eggs shouldn’t be a problem.”

She smiled her thanks and inquired, "Would it be all right if I get washed up?"

"Of course," Harry replied. "My home is your home." He slowly untangled their legs and crawled out of bed, holding out his hand to her to lead her out as well. "The bathroom is just through here," he said, swinging his arm in the direction of the door. "I'm going to run out and pick up the groceries and get started on breakfast. How do you want your eggs?"

"Scrambled and with cheese, please." she replied.

"As you wish." He leaned in and pecked her quickly on the lips before letting go of her hand and allowing her to head into the bathroom. As he watched her go, he acutely felt a sudden loss and wanted nothing more than to rush after her. As she turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder, the feeling only intensified. The fear of losing her must have hit him even more deeply than he realised if he was having such irrational thoughts after separating from her for just a moment. He shook his head and forced himself to move towards the front door.

Luckily he had some spare pounds in his trunk to pay for the groceries, and he quickly returned to the house and started cooking breakfast. He had made both bacon and eggs enough for the Dursleys that he could probably manage it with his eyes closed. He learned as a child that good food would often put his relatives in a better mood. It rarely allowed him a break from their cruelty, but he had found that it could help temper it. So Harry strived for perfection in his meals, leaving the eggs and the bacon cooked just right to allow the maximum flavour.

He heard the taps turn off as Ginny finished her shower. He flipped the bacon and knew it would be ready in just a moment. The eggs were nearly there as well. The bacon came off first, and the eggs immediately followed. He dished it all onto two plates and set one for himself and the other at an open seat at the table for Ginny. He seated himself and had to wait only a moment before the door to the bedroom opened and Ginny walked out. She was wearing the same

clothes as yesterday including the blouse that he had roughly mended for her.

“It smells delicious,” she commented as she was led seemingly by her nose to her place at the table.

As she sat down at her place to Harry’s left, he reached under the table and rested his hand just above her knee. He felt a small knot in his stomach unclench at the contact. She smiled at him before turning her attention back to the meal. Harry waited until she had taken her first bite until digging into his own meal. He had not realised just how ravenous he was until he polished off the plate in a time that would impress even Ron. Surprisingly, Ginny did not take much longer to finish her own. She licked her lips as her fork dropped onto her plate, and she commented, “I could get used to this sort of treatment.”

Harry could not help the pleased smile that tugged at his lips. “I always used to hate having to cook for my relatives,” he commented. He noticed a frown mar her features as he continued, “But I enjoyed cooking for you. I’m glad that you liked it.”

Ginny’s frown quickly turned into a smile as a companionable silence fell over the two. After a moment, Harry collected their plates and took them to the sink where he began to wash them. Once he completed the task, he set them in a drying rack and turned around to face the still seated Ginny. He retook his seat and reached out to grasp her hand; he felt a warm tingle in his hand as soon as he made contact. Swallowing the sudden lump in his throat, he asked, “How are you feeling?”

He was surprised when her smile widened. “Good, actually,” she replied. “I feel great.”

His disbelief must have shown on his face, for she laughed lightly and proclaimed, “Honestly, Harry. Okay, so my whole body is sore, and I know I should probably feel pissed off and violated, but I just don’t. What happened yesterday was horrible, but it’s over now. I’d rather just move on.”

Harry nodded his head. “That makes sense.”

“It’s strange, though,” she continued almost to herself.

“What’s strange?” Harry prompted with a frown.

“It’s nothing,” Ginny replied, shaking her head. “I must have just slept really well or something last night. I feel better than I have in a while – not since....”

Harry’s frown deepened as Ginny trailed off. Furrowing his brow, he inquired, “Not since what?”

Ginny lifted her eyes to meet his and asked, “Do you remember when I told you how ever since the Chamber I always felt like I was carrying around a piece of Tom with me? It always made me feel tainted.”

Harry squeezed her hand and nodded as he recalled what she had told him last night. It was more than just a feeling. Tom was still there, and he intended to find a way to remedy that situation.

After pausing a moment, she continued, “It’s the oddest thing. Ever since then, I’ve always felt him. I learned to suppress the feeling and ignore his presence, but I always knew he was there. Only, when I woke up this morning, I no longer felt him. I just felt lighter, as if a weight had been lifted off me. I couldn’t figure out what it was until just now. I haven’t felt free of him since before I started writing in his diary.”

Harry could not help but mirror Ginny’s smile. He was not sure what it all meant, but he was content just to see her so happy. It was with great reluctance that he interrupted the silence. “We have to go back.”

Ginny nodded, her smile dimming only slightly. “I know,” she replied with a small sigh. “My family must be so worried. I can’t even imagine Mum’s reaction.” Shaking her head, she met Harry’s eyes, “What do they know?”

Harry frowned as he thought back to the previous night. "Well, as I mentioned, I ran into Ron on my way out of the castle and told him that you were taken by Portkey and that I was going to bring you back." He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm guessing he probably told Dumbledore." Harry dropped his head into his hands as he came to a sudden realisation. "McGonagall probably told Dumbledore everything. She warned me that if I did anything she considered too reckless that she would go straight to him."

Ginny squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "Don't be. It's not your fault. I wouldn't have done anything differently. The only important thing is that you're safe. The secret would have come out over the summer anyway."

"So what are you going to do?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know," Harry answered. "What can I do?"

"Your exams are finished," she stated. "You could just stay here. There's no need for you to return to Hogwarts."

"But what about you?" Harry questioned.

"I'll be fine, Harry," Ginny deadpanned. "I don't need you to watch over me."

"I'm not going to let you face their inquisition for me," Harry stated. "I'll go back with you, and I'll deal with Dumbledore. I've been hiding from him for nearly a year now. Even if he tries to stop me, he can't keep me from coming back here at the end of term." Though he was confident in his claim, Harry could not help the doubt that crept into his mind.

"Are you sure?" she questioned.

Harry nodded determinedly. "Positive." He frowned as another thought entered into his mind. "We need to decide what we're going to tell them. They obviously can't know about this place," he said,

sweeping his free arm around in front of him, “and I don’t think we should tell them about Fawkes helping us.”

Ginny nodded, and they spent the next several minutes going over what they intended to tell everyone about what happened. When they were finally satisfied, Harry said, “I guess we should head back then.”

“I guess so,” Ginny agreed. They stood up from the table, and Ginny pulled him into an embrace. “I just wanted to say thank you. For everything,” she whispered in his ear. Harry just squeezed her more tightly. They stood there in their embrace for a long moment before Ginny pulled back, leaning in to give him a brief peck on his lips before stepping back.

Harry pulled her back to him for a deeper kiss. He smiled as he released her. “I’ll always be there for you. Whenever you need me.”

“I know,” Ginny replied with a smile. She reached up and cupped his cheek, and he leaned into the contact.

He reached up to her hand and clasped it, giving her knuckles a brief kiss before asking, “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Harry reached out and drew Ginny close to himself. Just as he was preparing to Disapparate, Ginny softly said, “Harry?”

He paused and looked down at her. “Yes?”

“I love you too,” she said, lifting her eyes to meet his gaze. “I just wanted you to know.”

A wide smile split his face, and he leaned in to capture her lips with his own. It was several minutes later that the two finally disappeared wearing matching grins.

OoOoO

For the first time that year, Ron was the first of his dorm-mates out of bed – or at least, first of those who had actually slept in their dorm. His eyes settled uneasily on Harry's four-poster. He had barely slept. He had tossed and turned for most of the night and had only slipped into a fitful sleep just after the first light of morning. Now he was awake again at some Merlin-forsaken hour. His mind would not allow him rest – not while his little sister and best mate were both missing. Shaking his head, he threw on a robe and stumbled out of the room and down the stairs. He just needed to get out of there.

He wandered out into the corridors aimlessly, too lost in his thoughts to pay attention to where he was going until he suddenly found himself at the entrance to the Great Hall. The room was nearly empty, with only a few scattered students present and about half of the staff. His feet carried him to the Gryffindor table out of habit, and he sank onto the bench. There were only two other students at the Gryffindor table, and they were at the opposite end, leaving Ron in solitude.

He loaded his plate without much thought and began to mechanically eat breakfast. After a few bites, though, he let go of his fork, causing it to clatter noisily against his plate. He could not even taste the food, and his stomach revolted at the idea of trying to eat any more. Sighing in disgust, Ron stood and marched back out the door and into the entrance hall. The doors leading to the grounds caught his eye, and he strode towards them.

The wind whipped through his hair as he walked towards the lake. He walked along the path for a bit before settling down at the base of a tree. He sat with his back to the trunk and faced the lake, looking without really seeing. He continued his mental struggle against his subconscious which attempted to conjure increasingly dire and morbid circumstances that his little sister and best friend might be in. For several minutes he tried to stymie the images flashing before his mind's eye. Unable to take it any longer, he growled in frustration and shot to his feet.

He began walking again, nearly stomping as his feet carried him at a fast pace. He wished there was something he could do – anything. In the Chamber, when he had been separated from Harry, he had

latched onto the task of moving the pile of stones so that his little sister and best friend could escape. He knew Harry was special. He had always seen it in him. He had refused to even consider that his friend would not come back with his sister, and so he had set about the task of ensuring that they could get the hell out of that Chamber as soon as possible.

Now, here he was again, left behind while Harry went to rescue his sister. Only now he had nothing, no task to ease his mind or conscience. As he blindly trudged along the well-worn path, a distant voice registered through the haze clouding his mind. He heard it again and recognised his name being called. Without even lifting his head, he continued along, not in the mood for company at the moment.

“Ron, you great prat!”

Suddenly, he realised that the voice sounded familiar. He looked up, and in the distance he could see two forms walking towards him, one with a black mop of hair, the other with long, Weasley- red hair. He stopped short, nearly tripping over his feet. “Ginny?”

OoOoO

It was with a wide smile that Harry Side-Along-Apparated Ginny to the gates of Hogwarts. He was surprised at the amount of energy the relatively simple task sapped from him. Looking Ginny over, he shrugged it off. He had used a considerable amount of magic last night. Given a day or two of relative rest, he was sure he would bounce back. As he looked up at the castle, a sense of foreboding settled over him. He was walking into what he knew would be an interrogation.

As he felt Ginny take his hand, he shook himself out of his thoughts and looked over at her, his smile returning to full force. It was amazing the amount of comfort he could take from such a small form of physical contact. Just last night he had been wondering if he would ever see her again. He knew now not to take anything for granted.

“Why does it feel like we’re walking into enemy territory?” Ginny asked with just a trace of amusement lining her voice.

Harry chuckled. “You have nothing to worry about. Your family will be so thrilled to have you back safe and sound, and your mother will no doubt rush you off to the Hospital Wing to have you checked over. Leave Dumbledore to me.”

“You don’t have to do it alone, Harry,” she admonished.

“I know,” he stated, squeezing her hand lightly. “This is my battle, though, and it’s been a long time coming. I can’t say I’m looking forward to it, but this is something I need to do.”

They continued walking along the path towards the castle. Harry took as much enjoyment out of the peaceful environment as he could because he was sure that as soon as they entered the castle, chaos would reign supreme. It was not long before they spotted a familiar, lanky figure lumbering down the path towards them. Ron appeared not to notice them as his head was downcast. From beside him, Ginny yelled, “Ron!”

The boy in question gave no response. Ginny tried three more times before he finally looked up. He was too far away for Harry to take in his facial features fully, but even from that distance he could see that his friend’s jaw had dropped. Ron had stopped walking as he stared at the two of them, before he ran towards them at a dead-sprint. As he approached, Ron barely slowed down as he ran straight into Ginny, whose hand was tugged out of Harry’s as she gave out a grunt of pain. Ron lifted her bodily off the ground and swung her around while babbling incoherently.

Harry could not help but laugh at her predicament as Ginny scolded Ron and demanded to be put down – though Harry noticed that she was holding her brother just as tightly even as he complied. He mumbled an apology as he let her go, but he sounded far from contrite. Before Harry knew what had hit him, Ron turned to him and pulled him into a hug. The slaps to Harry’s back rivalled those he

would expect from an over-emotional Hagrid. He suppressed his wince as Ron said, "I don't know how you did it, mate, but thank you."

Ron's voice was thick with emotion, and as he was released from the embrace, Harry noticed Ron's eyes were shining a bit with unshed tears. Ron took a moment to wipe his sleeve across his eyes before he asked, "What happened? Are you both okay?"

"Probably should have asked that before assaulting us," Ginny commented in amusement, though Harry guessed the words were not entirely meant in jest.

"Sorry. It's just I've been worried sick," he gushed, before paling suddenly. "Bloody hell, everyone else is still going spare! What are you waiting for? Come on."

With that, Ron turned and set a pace that Harry was hard-pressed to match. Ginny was practically jogging at his side as they trailed behind the tall red-head. Having had enough, Ginny yelled at Ron to slow down, and they finished their journey at a much more reasonable pace. Soon enough, they were ascending the steps to the front door of the castle. Ron led the way through the entrance hall, and Harry felt his stomach squirming as he realised exactly where Ron was leading them.

OoOoO

As he surveyed the students passing whispers and furtive glances around their meals, it became clear to Albus that something would have to be said. Miss Weasley's mysterious disappearance from the library was no doubt common knowledge by now among the castle's occupants. Mr. Potter's absence was all-too-apparent as well. It was always best to dispel rumours before they could spiral out of control; however, he doubted any tales currently circulating were much worse than the truth. Two of their number were missing, likely having engaged with Death Eaters the previous evening.

Miss Weasley's status, at least, still registered on Molly's clock as 'Home'. It was a curious circumstance. He was not familiar with the

exact charms employed on the clock, so he could only speculate on the true meaning of such a distinction. In any case, it gave him hope that she, at least, was safe. If they were lucky, Harry was safely at her side. It was almost too much to hope for.

The hall was about as full as he expected it to be this morning, so he stood from his place at the head table. Tapping his fork to his goblet, he called for the attention of his students. "Good morning to you all. Many of you have no doubt heard disturbing rumours being passed since last night. If you might humour an old man, I'd like to take a moment to shed some light on the situation."

His gaze swept the hall, knowing he had the students' full attention. As he opened his mouth to continue, the words hung in his throat. Walking into the Great Hall was a determined Mr. Weasley, and behind him were his two missing students. Excited chatter broke out as the students noticed the new arrivals. "As you can no doubt see, Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley appear to be no worse for wear. Now, if you'll excuse me...."

With an agility that belied his age, he made his way around the head table and towards the entrance hall. His twinkling eyes meeting each of theirs in turn, he addressed them, "If none of you require immediate medical attention, I'd ask you all to follow me to my office." Pausing just a moment to verify that his initial impression of their state of health was correct, he proceeded to lead them into his office. As he welcomed them all into their seats, he approached the Floo.

Before he even collected a pinch of powder, green flames roared to life in the grate. Molly Weasley's head appeared in the fire a moment later, "Albus, the clock says she's at school. Is she there? Have you seen her?" the frantic witch demanded.

"Molly, your timing could not have been more perfect. I was just about to contact you. Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter are both in my office at this moment."

Her head disappeared before he had even finished his statement, and a moment later the witch strode out of the fireplace determinedly. Arthur followed a moment later, but by this time, Molly already had

Ginny locked in a bone-crushing hug as she sobbed out her thanks to various past wizards. Albus nodded to the middle-aged wizard who walked towards his daughter and wife.

OoOoO

Harry watched with a wistful smile as Ginny was embraced by her parents. Seeing the dark circles around the eyes of her parents, Harry felt bad about not returning sooner, but he did not regret the decision. The truth was that he needed that time, and he suspected Ginny did as well. He turned and noticed the headmaster smiling fondly at the scene. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught sight of the red plumage of Fawkes.

He walked over to the phoenix's perch and reached out his hand, allowing Fawkes to lean into it as he began to scratch along his neck. Thank you, Harry mentally stated. I don't know what would've happened without your help.

Fawkes trilled a joyful note that brought a bright smile to Harry's face. He felt someone's eyes upon him, so he turned to find Mr. Weasley's standing a few paces from him. Harry opened his mouth, but he had no idea what to say.

He was spared the trouble when Mr. Weasley raised his hand to stop him from speaking. Harry watched as he removed his spectacles and rubbed away the accumulating moisture from the corners of his eyes. Putting his glasses back on, he began, "I don't know how we can ever thank you. It was a very foolish thing you did, but you brought my daughter back to me. Again. Thank you."

Harry was stunned when Arthur suddenly hugged him. His arms remained at his sides for a moment before returning the embrace. When he released him, Arthur met his eyes for a short moment before turning to his daughter and wife. It took a bit of doing, but he managed to extract Ginny from her mother and pulled Ginny into a hug.

Mrs. Weasley's gaze lingered on her daughter for a long moment before turning towards him. "Harry Potter," she began, and he could

tell from the tone that he was in for a tongue-lashing that would make the twins proud. "Of all the stupid, reckless..." she stopped her tirade abruptly and burst back into tears as she pulled him into her crushing embrace. Amidst her tears she uttered a myriad of thanks.

When she finally let him go, Harry knew that he was blushing from the heat in his face. She began looking back and forth between Ginny and him asking a slew of questions. "What happened? Are you hurt? Where were you? Why did it take so long for you to get back?"

Mr. Weasley approached his wife and laid a hand on her shoulder as he turned to address them. "Perhaps we should start with the most important. Are either of you hurt?"

Harry turned to look at Ginny who did not appear ready to open her mouth, so he offered, "I'm fine." He noticed more than one set of eyes rolling at his comment. "No, I really am fine. Wasn't hit with a single curse." That seemed to allay some of their fears, but he noticed a few eyebrows rise as well.

All eyes turned to Ginny. She shrugged her shoulders, "I'm okay." Mrs. Weasley's glare alone was enough to make her elaborate. "I'm a little sore is all."

Harry noticed as Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth to speak, but it was Mr. Weasley's calm voice that asked the question. "Sore from what, Ginny?"

Ginny cringed at the question, no doubt knowing what the response would be. Harry took a step towards her and squeezed her hand comfortingly as she said, "The Cruciatus Curse."

Harry watched as each of the Weasleys' faces turned ashen. "My baby!" Mrs. Weasley cried, rushing forward as if to envelop Ginny in another hug but seeming to think better of it. "Let's get you to the Hospital Wing and have Poppy take a look at you."

"An excellent idea, Molly," the headmaster agreed.

Harry met Ginny's eyes and could see her desire to stay with him, but Harry shook his head slightly and gave her hand one last squeeze before letting go as her mother ushered her out the door. Mr. Weasley and Ron both hesitated a moment before following the two out the door. In that moment Harry wanted nothing more than to reclaim Ginny's hand and accompany her to the Hospital Wing, but before he was even able to contemplate making a move towards the door, Dumbledore's voice stopped him. "I'd like a moment, if you will, Mr. Potter."

Harry turned to face his headmaster. There was no twinkle in the man's eyes as he gazed at Harry. Nodding, Harry answered, "Of course, Headmaster." Harry could feel his stomach tying itself in knots at what he knew was to come.

Before either man could speak, Fawkes trilled a note that radiated comfort, and Harry could not help but smile at the phoenix.

"It appears Fawkes is also quite happy to see you safe and sound, Harry," Dumbledore said softly.

Harry walked back to the perch and gave the phoenix's feathers a few strokes before turning around to face the headmaster. "What did you wish to speak with me about?" he asked, hoping to move past the pleasantries and get on with it.

"You know as well as I do. Take a seat, Harry," the wizened man replied, waving towards the chair opposite his desk. "Or do you prefer Jim?"

Harry grimaced as he seated himself. "You've been speaking to Professor McGonagall, I take it?"

"Imagine my surprise when she had a most interesting tale to tell me," Dumbledore stated.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I can't say I'm surprised. She did warn me that she'd tell you if I did anything foolish or reckless."

“Ah, so you too consider your actions last night foolish and reckless?” the headmaster inquired.

Harry nodded his head. “You could say that, Professor. I wouldn’t change a thing though. There was no time. I barely made it to Ginny in time before her trail went cold.”

“And how did you manage to follow Miss Weasley?” Dumbledore queried.

Harry leaned forward in his chair and conspiratorially whispered, “Magic.”

The headmaster frowned at him. “Mr. Potter...”

“You don’t expect me to just spill all my secrets, do you, sir?” Harry interrupted.

“What purpose does it serve to hide such things from me?” retorted Dumbledore.

It was Harry’s turn to frown. “I’ve given you ample opportunities to stop treating me like a child. You won’t even let me sit in on Order meetings, let alone actually get involved. You may think I’m too young for this, but it’s not your choice. It’s not even my choice. Voldemort will come after me. He’s going to keep coming until one or both of us is dead. Whether you like it or not, I’m involved in this war. You’re only deluding yourself if you think you can keep me out of it now.”

“You are still young, Harry,” Dumbledore countered. “It is the greatest mistake of youth to grow up too quickly. You’ll never get your youth back. This is not the time for you to be fighting wars. Take what joy from it you can before it is too late.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” Harry fired back, shooting to his feet and beginning to pace in front of the desk. “How much joy do you think I took from my childhood? How much joy was there to be had sleeping in a cupboard under the stairs? How much joy was I to take from living with people who thought of me as nothing more than a

freak? Was I supposed to enjoy all those years of abuse? Was I supposed to enjoy being worked like a slave for them? Or perhaps being locked in a cupboard for days at a time is your idea of fun? Or maybe spending every day trying to avoid your cousin whose favourite game is to beat you up? Tell me, Headmaster,” Harry demanded, stopping his pacing and slamming both hands on the man’s desk. “I’d really like to know where exactly the joy of youth is because I have yet to see it.”

Harry stared at the man for a long moment before reining in his emotions and bringing himself back under control. After a moment, he backed away and reclaimed his seat. The headmaster had averted his gaze, and Harry stared at him, waiting for him to speak.

Harry was shocked to see a tear roll down his headmaster’s cheek. The man did nothing to stop the course of the tear as he finally turned back to Harry. “What would you like me to say, Harry?” His voice was soft, almost defeated. “That I’m sorry? I fear that I’ve caused as much harm against you as your own enemies. But if you’re asking me to regret my actions, I’m afraid I cannot. I wish I had done more for you, made your childhood more bearable – even enjoyable, but I do not regret placing you with your relatives. Happy you may not have been, but you were safe.”

Harry sighed. This argument was pointless. “I’m not asking for apologies, Professor. The past is the past. But do not sit there and tell me that I’m young and should try to enjoy it while it lasts. I don’t have that luxury – that’s why you stuck me with the Dursleys to begin with. The prophecy states that I’m the one that can beat Voldemort, but I somehow doubt he’s just going to roll over and die for me. There’s no time for me to laze about. People are dying out there; I’ve been forced to watch. How am I supposed to act like a normal kid when I know that I’m the only one who can put a stop to it?”

Dumbledore massaged his temples for a moment before responding. “Now, Harry, you see why I was so reluctant to share with you the prophecy. It has placed a great weight on your shoulders, one you should not have to bear. I could see it in your character, even at age eleven. You took it upon yourself to save the Philosopher’s Stone, a responsibility which was not yours. You take the problems of the

world upon yourself. The prophecy may state that you are the one with the power to defeat Voldemort, but nobody expects you to fight this war alone, nor do we expect you to fight at your age. This war has been fought since before you were born, and we will continue to fight it until you are ready. Do not feel, Harry, that you need take on the responsibility to shield others from this war.”

“You need every capable fighter you can get,” Harry responded. “And I need all the experience I can get. Some of my actions have been rash; I can admit that, but I’ve survived. More than that, I’ve walked into battle and proven myself more than capable. Pit me against the best fighter in the Order, besides yourself, and I guarantee that I can at least put up a good fight if not win.”

“It is not a question of whether or not you are capable,” Dumbledore replied. “I dare say you have proven yourself most capable, but think for a moment what you are risking.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “The prophecy states that you are the one with the power to defeat Voldemort. Your life is more important than any other right now, and yet you risk it without thought. Have you given any consideration to what would happen to the world should you fall in battle? We do not know if anyone else could ever have the strength to take your place.”

“So my life is worth more than others’?” Harry asked. “You want me to stand aside and watch others die when I could save them?” His hands were gripping the arms of his chair forcefully, turning his knuckles white. “Had I not acted as quickly as I did last night, Ginny would still be in the hands of Voldemort, yet you would have me do nothing and allow her to be tortured and eventually killed because my life is too important.”

“I realise it is difficult...”

“No,” Harry interrupted, pounding the arm of the chair with his fist. “You don’t realise.” He was breathing heavily as he struggled to maintain his anger. “When I asked you what power I could possibly have that Voldemort doesn’t,” Harry continued in a harsh voice. “You told me that power was love.” He stood up from his chair and gave

the man a cold stare. "There's only one person in this world whom I can say that I love with absolute certainty, and I would rather die than leave her to that fate."

Sending one last glare, Harry turned on his heel and strode toward the door, which slammed shut before he could reach it. "We are not finished here, Mr. Potter."

Chapter 28: Out of the Shadows

Sending one last glare, Harry turned on his heel and strode toward the door, which slammed shut before he could reach it. "We are not finished here, Mr. Potter."

Dumbledore's voice radiated with power.

Very slowly, Harry turned to face his headmaster, who was now standing behind his desk. He said nothing as he met the man's stare. Any hint of the headmaster's genial, grandfatherly image was gone, replaced by the powerful persona that could invoke fear in the heart of even a Dark Lord.

"I need your word that you will cease any attempts to involve yourself in fighting the Death Eaters," the headmaster demanded in a steady voice.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "No."

"Perhaps you misunderstand me," Dumbledore responded. "I was not asking."

"Perhaps you misunderstand me, Headmaster," Harry replied evenly, though it was a struggle to keep the contempt out of his voice. "I am not your puppet. You don't have to like the choices I make, but you will learn to respect that they are my choices to make."

"That's where you are mistaken, Mr. Potter," the man countered, visibly calming himself. "You are still underage. Thus your choices are not your own."

Harry let out a bark-like laugh that held no humour. "You think the Dursleys will try to stop me? If they think it might get me killed, they'll be all for it. Might be the first thing we actually agree upon."

"Your aunt and uncle are your guardians in the Muggle World," Dumbledore replied. "In magical society, however, Hogwarts, and by extension the Headmaster, is granted a form of stewardship over the

affairs of Muggle-raised students in the Wizarding World. Given that the Death Eaters are part of the Wizarding World, involving yourself in battles against them falls under my jurisdiction.”

“Funny, I just can’t bring myself to give a damn,” Harry stated.

“Please think this through, Harry,” Dumbledore said, walking around the desk. “I do not wish to force you to do anything.”

Harry arched one eyebrow in disbelief. “You certainly have a funny way of showing it.”

“But I will,” Dumbledore continued, not acknowledging Harry’s interjection. “If you leave me no other option.”

“There are plenty of options,” Harry retorted, clenching his fists tightly. “You just won’t acknowledge any other than the one you’ve already chosen. Of course, you never consulted me in that choice, even though it’s my life you’re playing with.”

“Your behaviour right now only serves to reinforce that you are not ready for that responsibility,” the Headmaster reprimanded.

“Oh? So let me get this straight: I’m angry that you’re trying to dictate my life to me, and to you this means that I’m not ready to make my own decisions?” Harry questioned.

Dumbledore ignored his question and stated, “Your word, Mr. Potter. That is all I ask, and then you may leave.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Harry replied.

“I granted you a lot of freedom,” the headmaster stated. Harry failed to stifle a snort, but Dumbledore continued on as if Harry never made a sound. “I did not wish for you to feel as if you were trapped in a cage. Your guards at Privet Drive were always invisible. In the castle, I’ve allowed you absolute free reign. So long as you remained within the safety of Hogwarts, I saw no reason to add unnecessary restrictions. Now I am left with no other alternative.”

“What do you intend to do?” Harry scoffed. “Lock me up?”

The headmaster shook his head. “I am not this tyrant you seem to view me as. I have no desire to lock you up, but you must be protected – even from yourself.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “I had hoped I was wrong about you,” he said. “I hated lying to you, and I always felt that sense of doubt, wondering if you might accept me and the choices I made. Looks like I wasn’t just being paranoid.”

“You lied because you knew I and others would disapprove of your actions,” Dumbledore countered. “That is why even Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have remained ignorant of your actions over the past year. Miss Granger, in fact, has become so worried for you that she saw fit to seek my aid last night prior to your disappearance.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he hesitated at that revelation before shaking it off. He would deal with Hermione later. “Do you honestly expect to be able to fool me into doubting my actions?” Harry asked with a humourless chuckle. “I’ve made some mistakes over the past year, I’ll grant you that, but I’ve also done a lot of good – saved lives. I will never regret that.”

“It would seem that we are at an impasse,” Dumbledore stated rather unnecessarily. “If you will not give me your word, I’m afraid you may not like the consequences.”

Harry gave absolutely no reaction to this statement – verbally or otherwise. His face was a blank mask.

“Very well,” Dumbledore continued after a moment of silence. With a haggard look upon his face, he waved his hand, and the door to his office reopened. “I am sure you wish to visit Miss Weasley in the hospital wing. I shall not keep you any longer.”

Harry stared at him for a moment longer before turning and walking away, his senses on high alert until he had made his way out the door

and all the way down the spiral, stone staircase and into the corridor. Dumbledore had not made any move to follow him, so Harry made his way to the infirmary, already dreading the confrontation he was sure to have with the Weasleys and Hermione and probably Madam Pomfrey – and whoever else might happen to be around.

As he came upon the entrance, he paused in front of the double doors and took a deep breath before pushing them open and stepping inside.

OoOoO

It was with a great sense of dread that Ginny allowed herself to be led out of Dumbledore's office by her mother. She had no doubts as to the headmaster's intentions, and, despite Harry's insistence that it was his battle to fight, she did not feel right leaving him to fight it alone. Looking at her mum, though, she knew that even trying to go back to the headmaster's office was out of the question. After the worry her mother had been through, a visit to the hospital wing was the least she could do if it helped put her at ease. And if she was honest with herself, Ginny knew she could use some pain relieving potions.

She sighed as they entered the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey hustled out of her office and did not hesitate to rush her into a bed. Her mum and the matron were talking back and forth about her as if she was not even there, which was rather annoying. It was not as if she was a child unable to speak for herself. She met Ron's eyes for a moment, and he showed his agreement with a roll of his eyes. "I am right here, you know," Ginny interrupted the two women. "Seeing as I was the only one there, maybe you should be asking me what's wrong."

Her mum frowned and opened her mouth, but Madam Pomfrey beat her to the punch. "All right, Miss Weasley. What's wrong?"

"I'm just sore," Ginny evasively replied.

"Sore from what, specifically?" the matron demanded.

She swallowed the memory of the torture she had endured and responded in a matter-of-fact tone, "The Cruciatus Curse." Her mum made a sound like a sob causing Ginny to nearly lose the tight grip she held on her emotions, but she refused to allow just the memory of pain to hold any sway over her.

Madam Pomfrey frowned and asked, "How long were you held under the curse?"

Ginny suppressed a shudder and shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea." Her father put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she looked up at him with a small smile.

"Multiple times?" the medi-witch questioned.

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, a few." Her mum gave a small whimper and walked to the head of the bed. She then began running her fingers through Ginny's hair while holding her other hand to her mouth – presumably trying to prevent herself from crying.

Madam Pomfrey clucked her tongue and walked over to a cabinet full of various vials of potions. She selected one and brought it to her.

"Drink this," Pomfrey demanded. "All of it."

Ginny gave her a dubious look before nodding in acceptance. She downed the potion quickly and gratefully accepted the goblet of water passed into her hands to wash away the foul taste.

"I want you to remain in that bed for the next hour while those potions take effect," Madam Pomfrey instructed.

Ginny could only nod her agreement, the matron's tone brooking no room for argument. Madam Pomfrey walked away, and Ginny was left with her parents and brother. Ron looked slightly uncomfortable at the foot of her bed, while her mother continued to run one hand through Ginny's hair. Her father's hand remained a comforting weight on her shoulder.

“Er – maybe I should Floo the others,” Ron stated suddenly. “Let them know...” his voice trailed off.

“That’s an excellent idea Ron,” her father stated. “Why don’t you ask Madam Pomfrey if you can use her Floo?”

Ron nodded and followed after the matron to her office. As Ginny watched him walk away, her mind drifted back to Harry, left alone in Dumbledore’s office. She had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach and knew that things were not going well for him right now. She hated that, in a way, it was her fault he was in that position. She knew it was illogical to blame herself for it, but she did all the same. She wished she could at least stand beside him and give him her support; instead, she was sitting in bed being fussed over.

She shook herself from her musings as, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the fire turn green and Ron’s head disappear in the flames. She would learn what transpired between Harry and the headmaster soon enough.

As if on cue, the doors to the hospital wing opened, and Harry walked in. She could tell from his stiff movements that he was upset, but as soon as his eyes connected with her, a smile lit up his face. He walked over to her and stood on the side of her bed opposite her parents. His hand grasped hers as he asked, “So how long are you in for?”

“An hour,” Ginny replied.

“Is that all?” Harry joked. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a visit as short as that.”

“Indeed,” Madam Pomfrey agreed as she approached the foot of her bed. “Unlike yourself, Miss Weasley, it seems, has enough sense not to do her body too much damage.” Ginny squeezed Harry’s hand as he shrugged in response. “And how are you feeling, Miss Weasley?”

“Fine,” she replied.

Pomfrey clucked her tongue once in response and gave her a long once over as though expecting some new wounds to sprout over her body. Apparently satisfied that no such thing would occur, she nodded and moved on. By that time, Ron had removed himself from the fireplace and came to stand at the foot of the bed. “Fred and George are on their way. Bill’s tied up, but he said he’d stop by later. I couldn’t get hold of Charlie.”

No one commented on the name he failed to mention. Ginny forced herself to swallow the sudden burst of both sadness and anger she felt at her wayward brother. It was times like this that his absence struck her the hardest. She was never particularly close to Percy, but he was her brother. With how he was acting, though, he might as well be a complete stranger.

The silence stretched on, but she could think of nothing to say to break it. It was Ron who finally spoke up. “So what happened?”

Ginny eyed her brother apprehensively. She was dreading the moment one of them would ask that question. She dared not even look at her parents, whom she knew would be just as impatient to hear about it. She glanced briefly at Harry and saw her own feelings mirrored there, though he tried to hide it. Shifting her gaze back to her brother she said, “I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

Ron looked as if he was about to protest, but then he seemed to think better of it and nodded his head. She knew that would only give her a brief respite from their questions, but she would gladly take all the time they were willing to give her.

An awkward silence settled over the small group. Ginny tilted her head back to look up at her parents before shifting her gaze onto Harry. She wanted to ask him how things went with Dumbledore, but she dared not even mention it in front of her family. As if he could read her thoughts, Harry nearly imperceptibly shook his head and mouthed the word, “Later.” She held his gaze for a moment longer before turning her head towards the sudden flash of green in her peripheral vision.

A smile tugged at her lips as she watched first Fred and then George emerge from the fireplace. "Look there, brother o' mine," George began the moment he stepped out of the grate.

"Our lost sister," Fred continued.

"And her very own personal saviour," George finished.

"I need to get me one of those," Fred commented.

"Right handy with oldie Voldie on the loose again," George inserted.

"Well stated, Fred," Fred complimented.

"Thanks, George," George responded.

Ginny chuckled as she replied, "You'll have to find your own. This one's all mine, and I won't share." She squeezed Harry's hand as she said this, sneaking a glance to see his eyes sparkling in mirth.

"Sorry, Gents," Harry added. "You heard the lady."

The twins emitted simultaneous sighs, lifting their hands to their foreheads in perfect unison. "I can't help but wonder..." Fred started a moment later.

"What's that, my favourite brother?" George asked.

"Your favourite, really?" Fred practically swooned. "You flatter me so. I didn't want to make the others jealous, but you're my favourite too."

Ginny rolled her eyes and noticed Ron doing the same.

"Of course. Handsome as I am, how could I not be?" George haughtily proclaimed. "But back to your wondering, brother."

“Ah yes, I can’t help but wonder how curious the whole situation seems.”

“Curious, George?” George rejoined.

“Indeed, Fred,” Fred continued. “You see, word is that our darling sister here was kidnapped.”

“The news nearly broke my heart.”

“Same here, my brother, but what strikes me is that the only one with any knowledge of this supposed kidnapping is her darling Harry here.”

Ginny was looking back and forth between the two as they continued their duologue, trying to figure out where they were going with it.

George nodded seriously. “Yes, a true hero he is, dashing into danger to rescue our beloved sister.”

“So it seems,” Fred agreed. “From the sound of it, he was in and out with his damsel on his arm, yet we, her poor family, heard nothing from the two of them until just now.”

Ginny frowned. Of all her brothers, Fred and George were the last she expected to hear any grief from on that particular subject. She opened her mouth but could not think of what to say to shut the two up. Most likely anything she did say would only spur them on, so she clamped her mouth shut and continued to warily watch the two.

“Whatever are you thinking, my brother?” George queried.

“What if the kidnapping was all a ruse?” Fred asked.

George gasped dramatically. “Why would they do such a thing as that?”

Fred shook his head as he continued. “You know as I do how difficult it can be to find a good place for a snog in this musty, old castle.”

Ginny's draw dropped.

"Too right I do," George agreed.

"So if two young love-birds..."

"That's enough!" her mum screeched. "Your sister has just been through a horrible ordeal. And you have the nerve to – to – insinuate such trash. Apologize to your sister and Harry this instant."

Ginny could not help the smile that tugged at her lips as her brothers simultaneously winked at her. Only Fred and George. "Our apologies," they both intoned solemnly, the tone clashing horribly with the smiles on their faces.

Ginny headed off another tirade from her mum by bringing up her need of a new wand. Her parents promised they would talk to the professors about taking her to Ollivander's the next day. Seeing that their mum's ire had faded, Fred and George resumed their bantering. If nothing else they were always good for keeping a conversation going, even if the two were just speaking back and forth about various inanities.

It was not long before Madam Pomfrey returned to give her another once-over. "Well, you appear to be no worse for the wear," she declared. "I expect you to take it easy for a few days. Avoid anything strenuous, and no broom flying for a week. Patients sometimes suffer delayed side-effects from the Cruciatus Curse that can include sudden jolts of pain or temporary loss of feeling to limbs. If you encounter any suspicious symptoms, I expect you to return to be treated. Is that understood?"

Ginny nodded seriously at the mediwitch before turning back to her family. With a smile on her face, she swung her feet off the bed when the doors to the wing opened and in walked Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall. She felt Harry tense at her side at the headmaster's appearance.

“Ah, I see Madam Pomfrey has pronounced you to be of fit health, Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore stated. “A fact which has us all quite relieved.”

She forced a smile onto her face and nodded in reply as her Head of House input, “I’m glad to see you safe and sound, Miss Weasley.” Her eyes flicked to Harry briefly as she said this, and she offered a small smile. “And the same goes for you, Mr. Potter.” She nodded her head at Harry and said, “Might I have a word with you briefly?”

“Of course, Professor,” Harry responded, his voice completely casual. Ginny squeezed his hand before letting it go, and he turned and gave her a smile before walking out with Professor McGonagall. Dumbledore watched the two of them as they left before turning back to face the crowd around her bed.

“Messrs. Frederick and George, it’s good to see you in this old castle again,” Dumbledore said, nodding to each twin – the correct one as he said each name. “You are welcome to stay for the day, so long as you leave by curfew. I dare say the house-elves can manage enough food for the two of you, as well as clean up whatever mayhem you leave in your wake.” His eyes twinkled madly as her mum harrumphed. “If you need to use the Floo, feel free to stop by my office.”

“Molly, Arthur,” he said, turning towards her parents. “Might I have a moment of your time?”

“Of course, Albus,” her mum replied as her father nodded his agreement.

Her parents each gave her a hug goodbye before exiting with the headmaster. Ginny turned towards her brothers when she noticed a figure rush into the room in her peripheral vision. “Ginny!”

Turning, she let out a startled “Oomph,” as someone collided with her. She found herself with a head of bushy hair in her face and the arms of a heavily-breathing Hermione wrapped around her.

After regaining her balance, Ginny returned the hug. Hermione pulled back, still breathing harder than normal, and gasped out, "I just heard the rumours and had to see for myself. I'm so glad you're okay."

"Thanks," Ginny replied.

Hermione turned her head back and forth in confusion. "Where's Harry? He's not..."

"He's fine," Ginny interrupted. "Professor McGonagall just pulled him away for a word."

Hermione nodded as if giving her agreement to her Head of House for having a word with Harry. What surprised Ginny the most was that Ron and Hermione made no move to be near each other. She had not made the connection earlier, but it was odd that Ron would have been by himself that morning. Looking back and forth between them, she noticed that they were both doing all they could to avoid each others' eyes. Ginny wondered what happened between the two of them but thought it best to keep her questions and observations to herself for the moment.

She noticed Fred and George both giving the two curious looks as well and hoped that they would not draw attention to it. They loved to push people's buttons, and, while they usually knew where to draw the line before things became hurtful, there was just no telling what the two of them would do or say.

The silence began to stretch on when Fred and George starting walking towards Ginny. "It's been such a long time since we've graced these halls with our presence," George stated in a wistful tone.

"Indeed, my good brother. Far too long," Fred agreed.

"I'm afraid we may need some help reacquainting myself to the layout," George continued as they both approached on opposite sides of her, each slinging his arm over her shoulders.

Fred inserted, "No doubt, George. Sign of old age, you know? The memory is the first to go."

George nodded mournfully, and Ginny rolled her eyes as she interjected, "Like you two ever remembered anyway. You needed a map to find your way around."

"You wound us, sister, dear," George stated dramatically holding a hand to his heart.

"I'm sure," Ginny responded. "Well come on then. Lunch should be served soon. Let's see if we can find the Great Hall."

OoOoO

Harry walked silently beside his Head of House as she led him to her office. Part of him was annoyed with her for having spilled his secrets to the headmaster, but his more rational side knew that he could not hold her responsible for her actions. He had promised, after all, that he would not do anything foolishly reckless again, or else she would have no other choice than to divulge what she knew of his secrets. Of course, he had not foreseen Ginny disappearing right before his eyes.

In any case, he knew being upset with her would accomplish nothing. What was done was done. He snuck a glance at her trying to gauge her thoughts, but her expression was as stoic as ever. He could not glean anything from her demeanour. He had a feeling she was not incredibly happy with him at the moment.

As they entered her office, she gestured for him to take a seat as she shut the door and strode around her desk and seated herself, her posture perfectly straight. "Before you start," Harry said, "I just want to apologize to you. I know I promised you that I wouldn't do anything stupid or reckless, and I know I put you in an absolutely horrible position. I'm sorry for that. However, I'm not sorry for my actions. Foolish and reckless they may have been, but if I hadn't done it, Ginny would be – she'd still be with them."

She nodded slowly in reply as she appeared to think over his words before formulating her response. "I am pleased that you were able to rescue Miss Weasley from harm. Truly, I know I speak for many people when I say thank you for finding her and bringing her back." She paused, and Harry nodded, not wanting to speak up as he felt that she had more to say. "However, I am very disappointed in the manner in which you went about it. I had hoped that by placing my trust in you, that you would do the same to me and at least extend me the courtesy of informing me before you ran off."

Harry nodded again as he pondered her words. Her expectation was completely reasonable. He owed it to her, in a way, for agreeing to keep his secret in the first place, and had he been thinking clearly – or had he had any time to spare – he likely would have done so. "I'm sorry. I don't really know what to say. I know what I did was stupid, but I wasn't thinking clearly at the time. Ginny had just disappeared right in front of my eyes, and I didn't really stop to think about anything. I just – I had to get her back."

"You have a good head on your shoulders, Harry," she told him. "When you choose to use it. I cannot condemn you for your actions. I cannot say how I would have acted in your place. However, it would be remiss of me to condone your actions. You've asked to be treated as an adult, and as an adult, you must be prepared to bear the full responsibility of your actions – which means you must learn to consider the possible repercussions before acting."

Harry nodded, considering her words carefully as she continued. "It may be that you would not have done anything different – though I would hope you would have chosen to do more than shout to Mr. Weasley that his sister had been kidnapped before promptly disappearing from the castle. At the very least, someone could have helped you or actually been aware of your situation."

"As it was, I was left in the very difficult and uncomfortable position of explaining to the headmaster what I knew of your exploits outside the school's grounds, as well as why I saw fit to keep that information to myself." She fixed him with a baleful stare. "I did not appreciate being put in that untenable position. What you must learn to

understand is that while you may have the maturity to make your own decisions, this school and its professors are still responsible for you while you are here. Had anything happened to you, it would have been on our heads – mine particularly.”

Harry bowed his head, knowing that she was right. He felt awful for the way his actions had affected her, but he would never regret his actions. He agreed that he should attempt to alert her to his actions before rushing into danger, given the trust she placed in him, but Ginny’s capture was an exception to the rule. He did not have the time to hunt her down. He very nearly missed his window of opportunity as it was. He could not tell her that, though, without potentially revealing more than he wished to.

“I understand, and I am sorry for putting you in that position,” Harry stated.

“But you do not regret your actions,” she finished for him. “And I would not ask you to.” She paused momentarily before adding, “Truth be told I do not entirely regret your actions. The important thing is that you and Miss Weasley are now safe, but with that said I expect better from you in the future.”

Harry nodded his understanding. He could not and would not guarantee anything, but he would try to alert her in the future if he found himself in a similar situation.

“I have not spoken to the headmaster since last night,” she said after a long moment of silence. “I dare say he is not pleased with either of us at the moment.”

Harry nodded. “He held me back in his office while the Weasleys all left for the hospital wing.” He grimaced as he recalled that encounter. “It was not pretty. He tried to force me to give him my word that I would not put myself into danger like that again. I don’t know what he is planning, but I have a feeling he will be keeping a much closer eye on me from now on.”

“That is the understatement of the century,” McGonagall interjected. “Albus has always had an uncanny ability to know everything that goes on in this castle. I’m surprised you were able to go so long without drawing his attention.”

Harry grew pensive for a moment before responding. “I think he was very much aware of all the training I’ve been doing throughout the year. He alluded to that earlier. I think he was trying to make up for last year by giving me the space and freedom I desired.”

She nodded. “You are probably correct, but he will likely begin interfering with that space and freedom.” Harry nodded; he had assumed as much. What he was most curious about, at the moment, was where she now stood in all of this. Prior to Ginny’s disappearance, she had tentatively given him her word to allow him to continue as he had been – excepting that any trips to battle Death Eaters be done with the Order in some way, shape, or form. Now that he had broken his end of the bargain on that point, he had no idea what to expect of her, and he was afraid to ask.

A silence descended over the pair. Harry sat silently regarding her, while she did the same to him. Finally, she leaned forward, placing her hands palm-down on her desktop. “I have been thinking long and hard about you, Mr. Potter. Ever since I first learned your secret, I have been thinking. In your first five years here, you did not display much effort in your studies or much maturity in your actions. You were a child as you should have been.”

“That child never came back for his sixth year,” she continued, leaning back in her chair. “I could see the difference in you immediately. It was not simply the fact that you were named an Assistant Professor that I treated you as a colleague. Had the Harry Potter of the past five years shown up, I would never have blurred that boundary between student and professor. When my students complete their seventh year here, I always insist on being called Minerva in any subsequent dealings. It is important, I believe, for people to recognise that I am no longer in a position of authority over them – that we are equals.”

“You are the first student whom I have ever offered that courtesy to while still attending Hogwarts. It is not due only to your status here, as I already stated, but because I sensed that you had already reached that point of maturity. Though I may not agree with your actions, my opinion on the matter remains unchanged. You are a very determined young man, Harry. Regardless of what others or I say, you will follow your own path, but I would rather you do so with an adult from whom you trust enough to seek counsel or assistance as needed.”

Harry's eyebrows rose into his hairline. “Thank you, Minerva,” he stated, still recovering from his surprise. “That means a lot to me.” She nodded in response while his thoughts went into overdrive. He knew that this would be a defining moment for any future interaction he had with his Head of House and potentially the entire Order, including the headmaster. If he could get Minerva McGonagall fully on his side, it would go a long way towards bridging the gap currently in place between Harry and the adults currently fighting the war against Voldemort. But he knew he would not truly gain her full support unless he was honest and straightforward with her, and that meant revealing at least one of his biggest secrets to her. There was some risk involved, but given her statement just now, he felt confident that he could trust her.

“There is something I think you should know,” he stated. He cleared his throat as one of her eyebrows arched up in silent inquiry. “I – uh – don't plan on spending my summer with my relatives this year.”

Minerva nodded thoughtfully and replied, “That is not entirely unexpected. Might I inquire as to where you intend to spend the break?”

Harry frowned and cast his eyes down to her desktop. He was reluctant to let her in on the Fidelius just yet, so he hoped she would settle for his guarantees that the place was adequately protected. “I won't say where right now,” he explained, “but you can rest assured that it is a perfectly safe location.”

“How safe, exactly?” she questioned briskly.

“As safe as Grimmauld Place,” he returned, meeting her gaze.

Her eyes widened in response. “You are certain?”

He nodded.

“And who holds your secret?”

“Someone I trust implicitly,” he answered vaguely.

She studied him critically for a long moment before replying, “I do not believe that your trust is so easily given anymore, Harry, so that leaves only one possibility.”

He smiled in response.

“You are certain it was cast correctly?” she asked.

“It has been tested, yes,” he answered.

“Who else is aware of this?”

Harry shifted in his seat as he considered how to respond. He was hesitant to name any names. Their involvement in his activities was not entirely his secret to divulge; however, if Minerva was to become an ally, she would need to know whom she could trust with his secrets. Besides, he planned on telling both Ginny and Remus of these developments with his Head of House, so it was only fair that he extend to her the same courtesy. After all, she had possibly the most to lose of any of them for throwing her lot in with Harry. “There are only two others. Ginny and Remus.”

“Remus Lupin?” she asked in surprise. Harry nodded as she asked, “How long has he known?”

Harry scrunched his face a bit as he made a see-sawing gesture with his hand. “Depends on how you look at it. He’s known about my Animagus training since the summer. I’ve been spending the full

moons with him at the Shrieking Shack.” Both her eyebrows rose at this admission, and Harry hastily added, “It was the least I could do. With Sirius gone, I hated that he had to go through that alone again.”

She nodded and said, “Like father like son. I was never given the chance to tell him, but I was never more proud of your father or Sirius when I learned what they went through to help their friend. It was foolishly dangerous and reckless,” she amended in a strict tone, “but spoke volumes to their characters.”

Harry held a half-smile as he thought of his father and godfather. “I never told him I was Jim. He confronted me during the battle at St. Mungo’s. He was not happy with me, but I was able to convince him to keep my secrets and to help me.”

“And Miss Weasley?” Minerva asked.

“Oh, she figured me out right away,” Harry stated with a fond smile. “I was a bit sloppy. When I rescued her in Diagon Alley over the summer, I used my Jim disguise but with my hair the same length and style as I had it when term first started. She made the connection on the train.”

“And has Miss Weasley been accompanying you on your adventures?” she questioned.

Harry shook his head. “No. Not yet at least.” At her inquiring look, he continued, “She has been training with me for several months now. She didn’t pick up on wandless magic quite as easily as I did, and since she’s still underage, she can’t go about using her wand just anywhere.”

“Indeed,” she replied. Harry’s stomach rumbled suddenly, and Minerva glanced at her watch. “Look at the time. We’ve missed the start of lunch, so we had best hurry if we want to eat.”

Harry smiled and nodded his agreement. As they began walking towards the door, Harry stopped her and said, “Thank you. I know

you don't entirely like what I've been doing, but it means a lot to me that you're willing to leave the decision in my hands."

"There are no more capable hands, Harry."

And with that, the two proceeded to the Great Hall.

Harry smiled as he noticed Fred and George seated at the Gryffindor table. He was glad they had stuck around as he did not get much of a chance to talk to them earlier. There was a large crowd around them, and the twins seemed to be entirely in their element as they gestured wildly, presumably telling one wild story or another. As he approached, he caught their eyes, and the two of them stood up as one. "Here he is, the man of the hour," one started loudly.

"He single-handedly tracked down and found our darling sister," the other continued.

"His girlfriend, you know," the first interjected.

"He forced his way into a den of Death Eaters."

"Barrelled straight through their forces."

"Emerged victorious with our sister and not a scratch on him."

"Let's have a big cheer for..."

Together they finished, "Harry Potter!"

The crowd gathered around the twins – and a fair bit of students at the nearby Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables – burst into a raucous applause facing Harry.

Harry shook his head at their antics, amused more than annoyed at the attention. He met Ginny's gaze in the crowd and noticed her eyes twinkling in mirth. He winked at her and then made a big show of shaking his head dramatically as he held out his hands to quiet the

crowd. “No, no, you’re telling it all wrong. I don’t know where you guys get your facts, honestly.”

He smirked as he noticed the entire hall fall silent at his words. If he was going to be thrust into the spotlight, he would at least see that it was done right. “First I had to find the place, which was no small feat in and of itself. Then I had to navigate through a maze – no, a...” he hesitated, searching for the word he was looking for.

“A labyrinth,” Ginny inserted helpfully.

“Yes, a labyrinth,” Harry agreed, getting into the story-teller role. “Filled with more dangerous obstacles than you can imagine. It made the maze in the Tri-Wizard Tournament seem like a stroll through Hogsmeade. Then I battled through a legion of Death Eaters, trolls, giants, and vampires, guarding the entrance to the dungeon in which my fair maiden was held.”

“I hesitate to even speak of the horrors that lurked in the shadows of this place. Dementors could not inspire such fear.” He shuddered theatrically. “Creatures fouler than the most terrifying nightmares – abominations – stalking me as I searched frantically. I finally found her, a pile of bodies, both human and creature, surrounding her as she wielded an unfamiliar wand. There was no damsel in distress waiting to be rescued. Oh no. This damsel breathes fire, and together we fought our way through impossible odds to escape that hellish place that would make even the residents of Azkaban cower in fear.”

He smirked at his captive audience as he drew himself up to his full height and finished, “And all that without a scratch on me.”

Fred and George both leapt onto their seats and began clapping loudly and shouting, “Bravo!” The crowd around them took their cue to join in, and soon the applause rang anew with loud whistles thrown in for good measure.

Harry took his bow and held out his hand to Ginny for her to join him. She curtsied for the crowd as Harry bowed again. Eventually, the noise died down, and Harry led Ginny back to her spot at the table.

They had to squeeze in tightly, but managed to seat themselves across from her twin brothers.

He intertwined his fingers with hers and ducked his head down to give her a swift kiss on her cheek. She gave him a smile as she turned back to her brothers, and Harry began loading up his plate with his free hand. As he began to fill his belly, he could not help but be grateful for the company of the twins. While they only added to the spotlight already on Harry and Ginny, particularly with the introduction they gave him, they did it with a light-heartedness that made it so much easier to bear. Plus, they were quite good at drawing and keeping everyone's attention onto themselves.

Harry looked back and forth down the table, suddenly noticing that both Ron and Hermione were missing. When he asked Ginny about it, she shook her head and said only, "Later."

His curiosity was piqued, but he nodded his head and went back to his meal. As he finished eating, he found his eyes scanning the Slytherin table. He could not prove that Malfoy was involved in Ginny's disappearance, but he would be willing to stake a small fortune on it. The pit of anger that had faded into relief reignited as his eyes swept back and forth along the table searching for his target. He was frustrated to find the tell-tale blond hair missing. When Ginny gave him a questioning glance, he shook his head and used his Occlumency to push out the emotions as he refocused his attention on his own table.

After the food was cleared, he and Ginny walked hand-in-hand to Gryffindor Tower with the twins trailing behind them. Shortly after climbing the stairs to the third floor, her two brothers suddenly pulled them into an abandoned classroom.

"Harry, mate," one started – Fred, he thought – as soon as the door closed.

"Seems you've been keeping quite a few secrets."

Harry held up a hand to stop them, "Hold on one second." Deliberately forsaking the use of his wand, Harry waved the same hand casually towards the door to ensure their privacy. Once he was finished, he nodded at the pair with a smirk and said, "Continue."

The twins looked at each other for a long moment before turning back to Harry and Ginny. She had seated herself at one of the desk chairs, and Harry sat on the desk behind her, his hands on her shoulders.

"Right. That answers one question then," Fred stated.

Harry quirked an eyebrow. "You didn't know?"

"How would we?" George asked.

"Didn't Dumbledore tell the Order?" Harry queried.

"Bloody hell if we know."

"Not like we're allowed to sit on the bloody Order meetings."

"Even when our sister's involved," George muttered bitterly.

Harry frowned. "You mean they still won't let you in?" Ginny looked up at him, and they shared a short look. "We assumed since they were using your products that you'd become members."

"Nope," Fred spat in disgust.

"Oh, they're happy enough using all our products," George explained.

"But we're still too young and inexperienced to become Order members."

"' I shall keep you apprised of any matters relating to you or your family,' Dumbledore told us."

“And of course Mum agrees,” Fred added resentfully.

“Any talk comes up about it, and she starts breathing fire.”

“Won’t hear a word of it.”

“And Dumbledore is happy to oblige.”

“We were only told that Ginny had been kidnapped last night.”

“And that Harry here had gone missing.”

“That’s not all we heard though,” George interjected mischievously.

“Mum and Dad were pretty worked up last night.”

“They weren’t as careful as they normally are.”

“And word is that you’ve gone a bit rogue, Harrykins.”

They paused and looked expectantly at him. Harry felt one of Ginny’s hands squeeze his lightly, and he squeezed her shoulder in reply. “I guess you could put it that way.”

“We heard you had McGonagall on your side.”

Harry eyed the two of them, trying to figure out where this was all going. “She figured me out about a week ago and agreed to keep my secret – so long as I didn’t do anything too reckless.”

“Like rush out to rescue Ginny on your own,” George finished for him, nodding seriously.

“Something like that, yes,” Harry agreed.

“Fred and I are tired of waiting for the Order to come around,” the one Harry thought was Fred stated.

“But we don’t have the resources or information to work on our own.”

Harry nodded as understanding dawned on him. The twins were as sick of being kept out of things as he was. “You want to work with me,” Harry stated, interrupting them.

“Precisely,” they said in unison.

Harry furrowed his brow in concentration as he thought over the proposition. He was not certain how he felt involving them in battle. They were of age and capable of making their own choices, but Harry would not take them with him unless he was confident that they could hold their own without taking unnecessary risks. “Have you been practicing at all since last year?”

They glanced at each other briefly before turning back to him. “Not really,” Fred admitted.

“We were preoccupied with the shop.”

“And then with the stuff for the Order.”

Harry frowned. “Are you two still making all your own stock at the shop?”

They both nodded.

“Not any more,” Harry stated. “Hire a couple people to do it for you – you should have done that already anyway. You’ll be training with me over the summer, and you’ll need the extra time,” he said. Their faces both lit up, but Harry continued before they could interrupt. “You do not fight with me until I say you’re ready, and you follow my orders. If I say retreat, you do so without question. I need to know I can trust the both of you to do as you’re told and remain safe; otherwise you’ll only be in the way.”

“Aye aye, captain,” they saluted him.

Harry nodded, though he was worried that they had given in too easily. He only hoped the gravity of the situation was enough to temper their penchant for ignoring authority. "We should be going before anyone starts to wonder where we've disappeared to." Waving his hand at the door, he removed the charms and wards he had put in place. He waited for Ginny to stand before doing the same and intertwining his fingers with hers as Fred and George led them to Gryffindor Tower.

OoOoO

Fred and George only stuck around a little while longer before leaving Hogwarts. They said they had some things to do at the shop, but what that actually meant was anybody's guess. In the common room, Harry was subjected to all manner of questions and comments from his house-mates. Many urged him to regale them with the tale of his flight from the castle and subsequent adventure. They rather tactlessly asked Ginny for her account of events as well. Needless to say, any such requests were summarily dismissed, and the requesters primarily ignored.

He did not see much of his closest friends. He spoke to Neville briefly. He had given Harry and Ginny a warm smile and stated that he was glad they were both safe before disappearing amongst the masses vying for their attention. Ron finally showed up shortly after Fred and George had departed, but he said little. It was clear that Ron wanted as badly as the others to know what had happened, but he was restraining himself from asking, for which Harry was thankful. Most notable in her absence was Hermione, whom Harry had not even seen since his return.

When he asked Ron, his red-haired friend simply shook his head and muttered, "I don't know," effectively ending the line of inquiry. It was obvious from his body language that he did not wish to talk about Hermione. Clearly something must have happened between the two. Though they argued all the time, their arguments were rarely serious in nature. He looked to Ginny questioningly, and she nodded pointedly to his unasked question letting him know that she had noticed the same thing. Harry frowned and wondered just what had come between his two oldest friends.

Desiring a distraction, Harry suggested a game of chess which Ron eagerly agreed to. While they began to set up the game, Ginny departed briefly to fetch some of her books. She still had a few exams left in the upcoming week.

Before he knew it, Harry had lost spectacularly in two out of three matches. The other match he had actually won somehow, much to Ron's consternation. When he had rather astonishedly pronounced Checkmate – he had honestly stumbled into it – Harry pumped his fist and whooped in joy. It was not the first time he had ever beaten Ron, but it occurred so rarely that it required a bit of a celebration.

Ginny smiled indulgently at him and patted him lightly on the head saying, "Good job, Harry." He stuck his tongue out at her as she returned her nose to her books.

After their third game, it was about time for supper, so the three packed up to head down to the Great Hall. As they were walking into the entrance hall, Ginny yelled, "Bill!" and dropped his hand as she rushed forward.

Harry scanned the hall and quickly spotted her eldest brother approaching from another hallway. He watched as Ginny leapt into his embrace as Bill strode into the entrance hall. Harry and Ron approached the two as Bill let Ginny to the ground. Bill held his hand out first to Ron, but was interrupted by a gasp from Ginny. "Bill! What happened to your face?"

Bill turned his head and Harry noticed the vicious looking scar that had caught Ginny's attention. He wore a half-smile as he responded, "Oh, just a little souvenir. Believe me, I'm quite pleased this is all I was left with," he commented with a quick, purposeful glance to Harry. "Besides, I kind of like it. Makes me look roguish, don't you think?"

He gave her a wink and, without waiting for a reply, held his hand out to Ron again, saying, "Good to see you, Ron." He then held his hand to Harry, who shook it firmly as Bill stated, "Thank you, Harry. For both of us." Harry met his eyes and nodded in recognition.

A moment of silence followed but was broken as Ginny decreed that Bill would be staying for supper and then proceeded to lead him by the hand into the Great Hall with Ron and Harry following behind. Harry knew that Ginny felt a special sort of bond to her brother Bill. He had been close to her before leaving for Egypt and had been the one to truly help her through her nightmares following her first year. The smile on her face alone was testament to the affection she felt for her brother.

Harry was content to watch her interacting with Bill and to a lesser extent Ron. Bill talked a bit about his job and how different things were working at Gringotts as opposed to out in the tombs in Egypt. Harry could tell from his tone that he missed his former position, but he knew better than anyone that sometimes circumstances forced you into less than ideal situations.

As the meal came to a close, Bill hugged his sister again and bid his goodbyes to Harry and Ron. They retired to the common room where Ron convinced Harry and a few others into playing a few games of Exploding Snap. After their fourth or fifth game – Harry had lost count – he left to visit his office. He wanted to ask Ginny if she would like to accompany him, but she was revising with some of her mates, and he did not want to interrupt. Harry climbed out the portrait hole and made his way down the hall. As he came to the first corner, he bumped into Hermione.

“Harry!” she exclaimed and wrapped her arms around him. Harry stiffly returned the hug as she whispered, “I’m glad you’re safe.” Noticing his tense stance, she let go and took a step back, asking, “What’s wrong?”

“I know what you did,” Harry stated simply.

Hermione frowned in confusion.

“You went behind my back to Dumbledore,” Harry tersely explained.

“I went to the headmaster with my concerns for you, yes,” she admitted unrepentantly.

“Suspicious, you mean?” Harry retorted.

“If that is how you choose to phrase it, then yes, my suspicions about you.” She sighed and reached a hand out to him before seeming to think better of it and dropping the hand back at her side. “I was worried about you. I still am.”

Harry snorted derisively. “Worried about what? That I was training in secret? That you didn’t know every little thing I was working on? That you weren’t able to spy on me in my office or the Room of Requirement?”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open, and Harry scowled. “Did you think I hadn’t noticed? How stupid do you think I am?”

“I’m worried for your safety,” she answered after finding her voice. “I was worried about just what you felt you needed to keep secret from your best friends. I was worried that you were taking the responsibility of this whole bloody war all onto your own shoulders!”

“Of course, poor Harry can’t take care of himself,” he rejoined.

“Do you have to turn everything I say into an argument?” Hermione snapped in frustration. “I’m not trying to pick a fight with you, Harry. I just want to help. That’s what friends do; they help each other.”

“We have different ideas of what exactly constitutes help,” Harry replied. “Rather than help me in what I’ve been doing, you’d deter me and, when that failed to work, run off to the professors for my own good. I think I’m perfectly capable of deciding what’s good for me, thank you.”

“And if you found me doing something you could not agree with, what would you do?” Hermione demanded. “Encourage me along and offer a helping hand? Or would you try to convince me to your way of thinking? Would you try to stop me?”

Harry opened his mouth to fire off a retort but thought better of it and paused, trying to imagine such a scenario. "That would depend," he admitted. "If you were doing something to hurt yourself or someone else, then yes I would try to convince you to stop. If that failed, I might have to try to stop you myself."

"So how is that different than this situation?" Hermione asked. "What gives you the right to interfere but nobody else?"

"I'm not trying to hurt anybody," Harry responded in exasperation. "I can't believe you'd think I would."

"Of course I don't think that, but for all I know what you were doing had the potential to hurt you. Given your actions last night – running off and fighting Death Eaters on your own – I can't say my suspicions were far off the mark," Hermione returned triumphantly.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "It's not as if I'm going out and picking fights. In case you hadn't noticed, we're at war. Only it's not being fought on battle fields but in homes and schools. Would you have rather I had just left Ginny to Voldemort? Would you really want me to have to watch as Voldemort tortured her over and over again, knowing I could have done something?"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm glad that you were able to save Ginny, but don't you see how dangerous it was? We're still students," she protested. "You should have gone straight to Professor Dumbledore and let him and the Order handle things. If nothing else, you should not have gone alone. What if something had happened to you? Then both you and Ginny would be lost, and we would have had no clue where to even start looking for you."

"And what would the Order have done?" Harry demanded. "Called a meeting? By the time they even decided what they were going to do, it would have been too late."

"You could have come to me or Ron," she returned. "We've always stood with you in the past. Why won't you let us now?"

“Do you think you’re prepared to face down Death Eaters?” Harry snapped. “Can you stand up to three, four, five or even more at a time? Can you defeat even one in a straight duel? Yes, you were with me last June in the Ministry, and we were all out of our league. If those Death Eaters had taken us seriously, we’d all be dead. It was only their arrogance and a whole lot of luck that kept us alive.”

“Isn’t that what we’ve all been training for?” she asked. “What else is the HA for but teaching us how to fight and survive the Death Eaters?”

“The HA is to give you a fighting chance - to give you and your families a chance to escape an attack,” Harry fired back. “Do you honestly think a few hours a week is enough to prepare you to actually fight in this war? Don’t be naïve, Hermione.”

“But you’re ready?” she questioned. “You’re a student just like the rest of us. What makes you so special?”

Harry bit back the reply he wanted to give. It all came back to that stupid prophecy, but he was not prepared to share that with her. She may have made some decent arguments, but the fact remained that she chose to go behind his back to Dumbledore, and she would do so again in a heartbeat. He would not give his trust to her when she so obviously did not trust his judgment enough to make his own decisions. “What makes me special is a lot of hard work. What makes me special are the reflexes gained from a hard life. What makes me special is the fact that I’m not content to just sit around and pretend like nothing is wrong. There is a war going on, and we’re losing. The Ministry is a joke. The Order is only reactionary. They do nothing to try to stop Voldemort or the Death Eaters, only try to minimize the damage. That’s not good enough for me.”

“And you call me naïve,” Hermione retorted. “You think you can make a difference in the war on your own, Harry? A war is not fought by one man. You can’t do this alone. Stop pushing us away. Let us help you. Let me help you. We’ll go to Dumbledore and talk things through.”

Harry emitted a harsh laugh. "What do you think Dumbledore will do? It's already clear he has no plans to help prepare us for the war. He would have us simply waste our time on childish pursuits in this castle while the country crumbles around us. We would leave Hogwarts wholly unprepared for what would face us. We might manage to survive a few attacks, but that is all we would manage – to survive from one attack to the next. I respect the man for what he has accomplished, but he has lost sight of what is important. Forced to choose between giving us the tools we need to survive or preserving our innocence, he chooses the route that will lead us all to our deaths. He would rather we have a couple more years as children than take what little time we have to help prepare us for this war, and you and so many others would blindly follow him."

Hermione was shaking her head fervently. "No, you're wrong," she insisted. "This isn't just anybody you're talking about. What makes you think you know better than the man who is considered by most to be the wisest wizard in the British Wizarding World?"

"Dumbledore is a wise man," Harry conceded. "It would be foolish to dismiss what he says out of hand, but that does not mean that you should blindly follow what he says. You pride yourself on being intelligent; it's time you start using that intelligence for more than just academics. You have only one year left at Hogwarts, then what? How will you survive the war? Have you even given thought to how you will survive the summer? Or are you placing your trust in Dumbledore and the Order to ensure your safety? Then again, they've done such a wonderful job protecting us from life-threatening situations in the past."

"So that's it then?" Hermione questioned. "Dumbledore and the Order make a few mistakes and you abandon them? They may not be perfect, but they've kept you alive this long, haven't they?"

"I've not abandoned anyone," Harry stated, shaking his head. "The only thing the Order has done to keep any of us alive is when they showed up in the Department of Mysteries last year. They spent the last two summers guarding outside Privet Drive when it is supposedly the safest place for me to be. Why? If Dumbledore's magnificent

blood wards fail, what is one Order member going to do to protect me? They guard Privet Drive not to keep Death Eaters out but to keep me in. Rather than explain the situation to me and ask that I remain, they post a guard to ensure it. They treat me like some child acting out against authority.” Unspoken, Harry added, They treat me like a weapon.

“So to prove you are not a child acting out against them, you act out against them?” Hermione asked in obvious disapproval.

“Think of my actions what you will,” Harry commented with a sigh. “I do not have to answer to you, Hermione, when my actions do not affect you.”

“But they do affect me,” Hermione insisted pleadingly, grabbing onto his arm as he moved to walk past her. “Can’t you see, Harry? I love you like a brother, and I could not bear to lose you. Please, you have to listen to me.”

“You’ve been like a sister to me since I entered the Wizarding World,” Harry agreed. “And while I recognise that anything that happens to me would affect you, I cannot let fear rule my life. If I am to die, at least I will die knowing that I have done all I can. I can die without regrets. Better than to place my trust in the Order to keep me safe and die wishing I had only stepped out from their shadow and moved to take responsibility for my own life.”

Looking directly into her eyes, Harry placed his hand over hers where she still gripped his arm. “I am sorry, Hermione, but my mind is made up. I would ask that you respect my decision, but I know that you will do what you think is right, as I do the same. Keep in mind, though, that this is my life, not yours.” With that, he pried her hand off his arm and continued on to his office.

His conversation with Hermione was playing over in the back of his mind even as he tried to focus on the book in front of him. He hated the way their friendship had deteriorated over the course of the year, but he knew that there was nothing for it. He could not go back to being the way he was, and he knew she would not accept him for

who he now was – at least not at present. He wondered if she still hoped to get the old Harry back – the one who was lazy and unmotivated and constantly going to her with his assignments for her to look over, constantly asking to borrow her notes with Ron the night before some exam.

Shaking his head he used Occlumency to push those thoughts to the back of his mind and resumed his reading. It was useless worrying about Hermione right now. There was nothing that could be done. Either she would come around and accept the choices he had made or she would not. It was not a pleasant thought, but he would not hide himself from stark reality.

He eventually left his office and re-entered the common room right around curfew. His eyes immediately sought out Ginny, finding her in the exact spot where he had left her. Sighing silently to himself, Harry made his way over and walked up behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders and lightly kneading her tense muscles.

“Merlin, that feels wonderful,” Ginny practically purred as she lifted her head from her book and leaned back in her chair.

“Well, how about you take a break, and we continue this over by the fire?” Harry suggested in a gravelly tone.

Ginny slammed her book shut and led him by the hand to an armchair by the fire. She waited until he had seated himself before sitting directly in front of him on the chair. She reached back and gathered her hair over her shoulder, giving Harry unfettered access to her shoulders and back.

“Eager, are you?” Harry teasingly asked.

“I remember what those fingers of yours can do,” she answered seriously. “I don’t think I’d ever say no to a massage from you.”

Harry chuckled as his hands started working. “I’ll have to remember that, then.”

“Please do,” Ginny responded moaning softly as his thumb found a knot. “Right there,” she encouraged.

Harry smiled and continued rubbing over the spot, concentrating on trying to relieve the tension. He glanced down and stopped, staring at his fingers. That was peculiar.

“Harry?” Ginny asked in confusion.

“Hmm?” Harry responded. “Oh, sorry, got lost in my mind for a second,” he said as he continued his ministrations, still staring at the soft blue glow on his fingertips. When he concentrated, he could feel the thin strand of magic flowing through each finger as he continued to rub her back and shoulders. He could not honestly recall having called up his magic, but he must have done so subconsciously. It was odd. As he focused on it, the magic felt like healing magic, though it was slightly different than any healing spells he knew. If Ginny’s moans – or the lessening of tension in her muscles – were any indication, he would say that the magic was definitely helping. Curious. He would have to pay closer attention to his magic in the future. He wondered if there were any other times he had performed magic without being aware of it.

After a short time, Ginny sighed and leaned back into his chest. Harry wrapped his arms around her stomach and looked down at her as she said, “Much as I wish we could continue, I really need to get back to my studies.” Harry nodded with a half-smile. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Any time,” he whispered.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

With that, she grabbed his hands and gently pried them apart so that she could stand. He quickly followed suit. “I think I’ll head off to bed,” he told her.

“Sleep well, Harry,” she responded, leaning up to give him a kiss. Harry brought one hand up to her cheek, sliding it back into her hair as the other sought out her hand and intertwined their fingers. Much

too quickly by Harry's reckoning, Ginny broke the kiss and leaned her forehead against his. "Good night."

"Good night, Ginny," Harry murmured his reply. Stealing one last brief kiss, he drew his hand back from her hair and took a step away, not releasing her hand until she began to walk back towards her study group, their fingers lingering against each other for as long as possible before the distance separated them. Harry released a heavy sigh and turned towards the stairs, unable to resist glancing over his shoulder for one last glimpse of her before ascending to his dorm. After quickly preparing for bed, he crawled onto his four-poster and shut the curtains as he ran through his Occlumency exercises, organizing his thoughts from the last couple days.

With the task completed, Harry turned onto his side and closed his eyes as he waited for sleep to claim him. He was a long time waiting, his body refusing to succumb to sleep. Some time into the night, well after his dorm-mates had retired to their own beds, the sounds of their snores filling the air, Harry quit his fruitless tossing and turning and lay still on his back, staring wearily at the canopy of his bed. Sleep, he could see, would not be coming to him. Sighing, he sat up and threw on a robe and shoes before silently padding out of the dorm and down to the common room. Thinking over his options, he elected to head down to his office. It would not be long before the term ended, and he wished to finish his Portkey project for the HA as soon as possible.

Upon entering the office, Harry had a suspicious thought and used his magical senses to do a quick sweep of the room. Frowning, Harry performed a thorough search through the office. It was all for naught. Harry was certain the headmaster would have tried something, but unless he had found some way to completely mask a magical presence, the office was completely clean of any monitoring spells or devices.

Settling in at his desk, Harry resumed his work with Portkeys. He decided that he was at a point where he could begin creating them en masse for his students. He was unable to test whether or not the Portkeys would last for a few months, but he was confident in his abilities and knew that he needed to trust his instincts on this. He

conjured up a rather simple looking pendant on a black cord with no real distinguishing features to it. It was small and – he hoped – inconspicuous. The students could easily keep it on them, either by wearing it as a necklace or simply keeping it in a pocket. Satisfied, Harry set to work creating the first of many Portkeys.

He was surprised when after a relatively short time he began to feel the drain on his magic. Frowning to himself, he pushed on. Portkeys were advanced magic, well beyond anything taught in Hogwarts, but after a solid year of pushing himself to his limits and expanding his boundaries, they should not be so taxing on him. As he pondered this, he began to wonder just how much of his magic the flame travel must have exhausted. There was no other explanation he could see for it. Perhaps he just needed a few days rest to regain his strength, but his inability to sleep would no doubt compound the problem.

He shook his head in an attempt to clear it and resume work when his eye caught the portrait of the Gryffindor common room, and he paused. Thoughts of the charms placed into his improved Marauders map flashed through his brain, and Harry had a sudden epiphany. He pulled out his trunk and dug out the notes he had made on the map, pushing aside the Portkeys he had been working on, lost inside his whirling thoughts.

He was rather surprised some time later when he noted the time. He had not realised how long he had been working. Standing, he began to stretch in an attempt to work the kinks out of his neck and back. Harry packed up his notes, both old and new, and vowed to return to them soon. He was onto something, but it needed a lot more work if he wanted to finish in time. Once everything was in place and secure, he left the office and ascended back to Gryffindor Tower. He was a few minutes early, so he settled into a chair to wait. A short time later he heard the soft patter of feet coming from the girls' staircase and turned as Ginny appeared at the base.

He stood and strode towards her, capturing her in a tight embrace. He felt a knot of tension that he had not been fully aware of dissolve at the contact, and he uttered a sigh of contentment.

“Good morning, Harry,” Ginny greeted with a trace of amusement tingeing her tone.

“Morning,” Harry whispered in reply.

When they released each other a moment later, Ginny eyed him critically and said, “You look like shite.”

He snorted. “Thanks.”

“Did you sleep at all?” she questioned.

Harry shrugged. “Couldn’t get my mind to settle, I guess,” he mumbled.

“Do you want to skip training today?” she asked. “I can sit with you while you lie down.”

Harry was mightily tempted to take her up on the offer, but he shook his head. “We should really get back into our routine. I can rest later.”

“When?” she queried. “You have HA classes before and after lunch. If you want the extra workout, then let everyone try to hex you for the whole class. Right now we’re going to your office, and you are lying down for a nap.”

Harry tiredly smirked at her tone which brooked no room for any argument. He nodded his head and said, “Yes, dear.”

She scowled at him. “Good. Now let me run up to grab some books quickly.”

A short walk later, the two settled onto the sofa in his office. She transfigured the arm of the sofa into the table-top she needed to hold her books while Harry settled down with his head in her lap. He was asleep nearly the moment his eyes closed.

By the time Ginny woke him, they were too late for breakfast, but a quick trip to the kitchens solved that problem as Dobby and the other

house elves were only too pleased to throw together a modest banquet for the two of them. Afterwards, Harry headed to the Room of Requirement while Ginny made her way to the grounds where she was due to meet her parents shortly.

While he did not take her advice to the letter, Harry chose a very active approach to lessons that day. As promised he did not introduce any new spells to his classes; instead they reviewed some spells they had learned over the year. They spent most of the lessons in various duelling exercises, of which Harry kept himself at the centre. He did spend a fair amount of time dodging throughout the two classes, but he also had the students working out strategies for getting around seemingly impenetrable shields. He felt normal physically throughout the exercises, but found that he could not hold his shields up quite as long as he was accustomed to. He tried not to let the matter bother him, though, knowing that he would work his way back to full strength quickly enough. He would settle for nothing less.

Ginny, meanwhile, confessed the exact opposite to him, though Harry thought it had more to do with her new wand than anything else. Her old wand had been a hand-me-down and not attuned to her magic, so it was no surprise that her new wand would work so much better for her, and he could easily see that this was the case even without hearing it from Ginny. Her spells during the HA were noticeably stronger than usual.

Harry and Ginny both received short notes at dinner that evening requesting their presence in the headmaster's office following the meal. There was little doubt in Harry's mind what the upcoming meeting would be concerning. He was marginally surprised it had taken this long. Dumbledore and the Order would no doubt want details about what occurred. To be honest, Harry was curious about Ginny's experiences. She had not shared much with him of her time in captivity, and he was almost afraid to ask for details, knowing he would likely not want to hear them.

Shortly after they witnessed Dumbledore and McGonagall leaving the Great Hall, Harry and Ginny by unspoken agreement followed suit. Hand-in-hand they walked to the headmaster's office, a walk that seemed suspiciously short by Harry's reckoning. He uttered the

password to the gargoyle, which promptly sprung aside to reveal the spiral stairs. At the top of the steps, Dumbledore called out, "Enter," without any prompting. Unsurprised, Harry opened the door and followed Ginny into the room.

Three faces greeted their entrance, two smiling and one scowling. Harry frowned, not expecting Snape to be present for this meeting. He looked around the room and was mildly surprised to find that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were absent. He had expected that Mrs. Weasley, at least, would have insisted on being present for this – if she was even told of it, of course.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley," the headmaster greeted.

Both Harry and Ginny echoed his greeting as Dumbledore swept his hand towards a pair of chairs and said, "Please, have a seat."

Four chairs were arrayed in front of the headmaster's desk. Harry sat next to Minerva with Ginny on the other side of him. The fourth seat was unoccupied as Snape stood in the corner of the room glaring at him. Harry ignored the man and returned Minerva's warm smile before turning his attention to the headmaster.

"I trust you are both recovered and well-rested from your ordeal?" Dumbledore asked them.

He caught Ginny nodding her head as he verbally responded, "Yes, sir."

"Excellent," he replied. "I realise that what I am about to ask of you may be rather difficult, but it is imperative that we know exactly what occurred the night before last from both of your perspectives. Perhaps you could begin, Miss Weasley, with where and how you disappeared?"

Ginny nodded and took a deep breath as she seemed to gather herself. Harry reached out and gripped her hand, which was resting on her armrest. She gave him a small smile before turning back to Dumbledore and beginning her tale. Harry beamed with pride as she

described her short duel with Malfoy. But the smile quickly vanished as her tale continued. At Dumbledore's urging she described what she could recall of the building's layout in her desperate attempt to escape. As they had discussed, she skirted certain details. Voldemort's Legilimency attacks, for one, were omitted from her tale; instead he had used the Cruciatus Curse to try to break Ginny and force her to reveal her secrets of her own volition. Her wandless magic in the cell was subtly changed into an uncontrolled burst of accidental magic. When she got to Harry's arrival Dumbledore stopped and thanked her before turning to Harry and asking him to describe his own part.

Harry wore a blank mask as his tale began. He told the professors of how he had Summoned his Firebolt and run up to the Owlery, recruiting Hedwig's assistance in tracking Ginny. He followed his owl to the manor and snuck inside. Harry then asked her to find someone from the Order and bring them there. After getting the drop on Malfoy and using Legilimency to find Ginny's location, he fell victim to Malfoy's deception and tripped the alarms while breaking into the dungeon.

After reuniting with Ginny, he explained how he set up two illusions to look like Ginny and him before sneaking out underneath his Invisibility Cloak and riding his broom to one of the properties Harry had inherited over the summer. He explained how they were both drained and in no condition to return to the castle, so they spent the night and returned to Hogwarts first thing in the morning.

Harry was pretty pleased with their story. It was not perfect and would probably not withstand much scrutiny, but by the time Dumbledore and the Order managed to find anything concrete to refute the story, Harry hoped to be holed away in his home for the summer. Dumbledore had several clarifying questions but none that probed into their fabrications. The other two professors remained mostly silent throughout the whole ordeal, Snape with a permanent scowl.

As they walked through the corridors leading back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry turned his head and met Ginny's gaze, offering a small smile.

“I think that went as well as we could have expected,” she said softly.

“Yeah, let’s just hope that story lasts through the end of term,” he responded. He hesitated as he considered whether or not to ask his next question before pushing ahead. “Are you okay? I know it must have been hard...”

“I’m fine,” she answered a little too quickly, her lips forming a smile unmatched by her eyes. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Harry frowned and lifted his hand to her shoulder drawing her to a stop. As she turned towards him and he got a good look at her, his suspicions were confirmed. “Come here,” he whispered gently, pulling her into a hug.

She came willingly after only the slightest hesitation, wrapping her arms around him and laying her head on his shoulder. He rubbed comforting circles over her back with one hand as the other held her tightly against him. “It’s okay,” he cooed softly as she fought against her emotions. “You’re all right now.”

They remained that way for some time before she finally took a step back, her eyes a little red. She opened her mouth to speak but hesitated, and Harry spoke up. “It’s okay. You don’t need to say anything. I’m here for you any time you need me, whatever you need me for.”

“Thanks, Harry,” she murmured, reaching out to cup his cheek. “I love you.”

He smiled and replied, “I love you too.” Leaning in, he gave her a brief kiss before claiming her hand in his and resuming their trek.

Harry found it nearly impossible to sleep again that night, a trend which unfortunately continued for the rest of the week. He was forced to rely on the naps in his office with Ginny to get any sleep at all. Ginny had exams Monday through Wednesday that occupied much of her time, and though Harry tried to nap while she was in exams, he

quickly found the action mostly futile. He managed with only a couple hours of sleep a day through Wednesday and eagerly took Ginny up on her offer of her lap for a pillow following her last exam.

It was with a bit of shock that he realised at the end of the week that he had not once seen Malfoy since returning to the castle. After failing to find him in the Great Hall the day of his return, the Slytherin had slipped from Harry's mind, but now that he thought about it, he was certain that the blond had been absent from every subsequent meal. Was he expelled? Did that mean he had been the one responsible for Ginny's disappearance? When he asked Professor McGonagall about it, she was not terribly helpful. She confirmed that Malfoy was no longer in the castle but either did not know or could not tell him more than that, and Harry could not ask the headmaster given the state of things between them – not that he expected he would get a straight answer out of the man.

That was another thing that surprised Harry when he stopped to think about it - the seeming lack of action on the headmaster's part. He had expected the man to begin tracking his every move and restrict him from all his privileges, but for all Harry could tell, Dumbledore had done absolutely nothing to even keep tabs on him. Perhaps he had had a change of heart? Harry was not holding his breath but rather waiting for the axe to drop.

So lost was Harry in thoughts of Malfoy, Dumbledore, and his Portkey project that he nearly forgot about the final Quidditch match of the year, which was scheduled for Saturday. It was only Ron's insistence that they hold a few extra practices that week that saved Harry. He quickly disabused Ron of that notion, and the team practiced only twice that week. They were playing Hufflepuff and, given the standings, would have to lose by a wide margin to forfeit the Quidditch cup, so Harry was untroubled.

The match and following end of the year feast provided what Harry could only describe as an anti-climactic, normal end to one of the least normal years of his life – and that was saying something. Gryffindor won the match, securing the Quidditch Cup and putting them in the lead for the House Cup. It was only through Snape's supreme efforts that Slytherin overtook that lead shortly before the

Leaving Feast. Somehow Harry did not expect Dumbledore to be charitable enough to award Gryffindor the points it needed to regain the Cup.

Harry scheduled a special meeting combining both HA groups following the feast. He was literally jittery at the meal in nervous anticipation; what he was about to do was risky and quite illegal. It was easy to make the decision to create and distribute Portkeys to his students, but now that he was about to hand them out, he could not help but worry about all the ways this could come back to haunt him. Yet no matter what repercussions he might face, he knew that he would never regret his decision. He stood a very good chance of being caught out by Dumbledore at the least and quite possibly the Ministry as well, and he knew neither would look kindly upon his casual dismissal of the law. Dumbledore, he imagined, would simply lecture Harry if given the opportunity, but there was no telling what Fudge would try to do with any charges levelled against Harry.

Having spent most of his free time since that first night back working out the different spells he wanted to add to the Portkeys, Harry had only finished mass-producing them the previous night. As he laid out the Portkeys on a table, his mind wandered over the inspiration for his additions. The Marauders really were geniuses, but there were so many more ways their skills could have been applied, it was almost a shame that their talent was wasted solely on pranks. Not that Harry did not understand the value of a good laugh, but even Fred and George were now directing their creative genius onto war-related projects. Nevertheless, even if they never applied their particular brand of talents to the war, the Marauders' ideas were proving to be an invaluable tool in his fight against Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

The students arrived en masse, presumably all coming straight from the Great Hall. Harry shut the door and used the contract to verify that nobody was present that should not be. When he was satisfied, Harry turned to a table behind him and picked up one of many identical pendants. "Each and every one of you is a target," he began matter-of-factly. "You all know this by now. Over the course of the year, I've done what I can to give you the tools to survive. Please understand that the training you've done here is not enough to go out and fight the Death Eaters. There are Aurors who have gone through

years of intense training who regularly fall to them. I've given you these tools so that you can remain living long enough to escape."

He paused as he allowed his students to truly grasp what he was saying. "To that end, I have something for each of you." He held up the pendant. "This is a Portkey," he explained. "In the event of a Death Eater attack, I want you to collect your family and use this to escape. Do not try to be a hero. Death Eaters do not fight fairly, and they do not work alone. They always attack in numbers that will all but ensure their success."

"To activate the Portkey, simply make sure that every member of your family is touching either you or the Portkey and say the keyword." Putting the Portkey down, he continued, "The keyword is Sanctuary, and the Portkey will deposit you at the gates of Hogwarts. From there, I would advise that you take your family onto the grounds and request help from the headmaster or whatever professor you meet first."

"I hope you all take my warnings seriously," Harry stated imploringly. "I do not wish to read the Daily Prophet one morning to find any of your names added to the list of victims of this war. Use what I've taught you to survive and to fight long enough to give yourselves and your families the time you need to escape."

He called the students to come up and each collect a Portkey. Many stopped off to shake Harry's hand and thank him for all he had taught them, but, as the general mood was a sombre one, Harry hoped that it meant the students had taken his words to heart. Of course, not all the students left after picking up a Portkey.

When all but his five friends who had accompanied him to the Department of Mysteries a year ago had left, Hermione turned to him. "How did you get so many Portkeys?"

Harry shrugged as he casually replied, "I'm not supposed to talk about it." It was not technically a lie; of course, he had no plans to inform her that this edict was self-imposed.

“Portkeys are regulated by the Ministry,” Hermione continued. “You could get into a lot of trouble for supplying unsanctioned Portkeys.”

“I’m aware of the laws governing Portkey creation and distribution,” Harry responded.

“Then you’re aware that you will likely serve time in Azkaban in addition to the large fine you’ll be levelled with?” Hermione asked biting.

“As I said, I’m aware of the laws,” Harry repeated.

“Fine,” Hermione answered, and she left without another word to anyone.

Silence stretched over the group following her abrupt exit.

“Thank you for the Portkey, Harry,” Luna spoke into the silence. Harry smiled at the blonde girl as she continued, “They should be very useful.” Harry nodded his agreement as she added, “The Quailing Blognites Daddy and I are investigating over the holidays are attracted to the magic in Portkeys. Daddy’s been trying to acquire one from the Ministry, but they refused. He’ll be so happy.”

“Er – you’re welcome, Luna,” Harry replied. “I’m glad I could help.”

Luna suddenly stepped towards him and encircled him in a hug, saying, “Thank you for being my friend, Harry. It’s been fun. Will I see you next term?”

Harry returned the hug for a moment before letting the girl go and frowning. “You’ll see me tomorrow on the train, Luna, as well as next year.”

“Oh, will I?” she inquired, staring straight into his eyes. Harry nodded. “All right then. See you all tomorrow then.” She smiled at all of them before leaving.

As she trailed out the door, Ron could be heard muttering, "Absolutely barmy." Given how much consideration he had given to skipping the train ride entirely, Harry had to disagree with him – not that he said so aloud. Ron shook his head abruptly before looking up at Harry. "I'm not going to ask," he stated. "Whether you can't talk about it or just don't want to, that's fine. Just thanks."

Harry stood frozen in shock as he stared at Ron. "Same goes for me," Neville input, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "Something tells me you've just put your neck out on the line for all of us, and I, for one, am not going to scold you for it. Thanks, Harry."

Harry nodded his head, a smile forming on his lips as he regained his bearings. "I appreciate that, guys. Thanks." As he looked past Neville, his eyes caught Ginny's who had a smile mirroring his own. She gave him a wink, and Harry's smile stretched even wider.

"Listen," Harry said a moment later. "I'll catch you guys up in the common room. I have a few things I need to do first."

They took their cue, leaving Harry alone. Once they had left, he cancelled the disillusionment and sticking charm he had cast over the parchment on the table. He pulled out and enlarged his trunk and then rolled up the parchment and tucked it inside. Slipping his re-shrunk trunk back into his pocket, Harry descended to his office. He made quick work of packing up all his things – most importantly his revised Marauder's Map. He gazed fondly at the room as he stood in the doorway, hoping he would still have it in the coming year.

Closing the door he ascended back to the seventh floor. He bumped into Hermione on the stairs, and she did not seem pleased to see him.

"Why can't I talk about the Portkeys you gave us?" she demanded.

"Were you trying to discuss them with someone outside of the HA?" he asked.

"I was trying to talk to Professor McGonagall about them," she stated bitingly. "I don't know where you got all these, but someone in

authority needs to know before you get in too much trouble. Only, when I tried to talk about them, I ended up saying something else entirely.”

Harry had to suppress a smirk. “Oh. The contract you signed prevents you from talking about it to non-members. I must have forgotten to exclude the staff in that.”

“Don’t give me that act,” she spat. “I know you’re just trying to keep everyone safe, but you could get in serious trouble for this. The professors need to know, and if I have to find a way around the contract, I will.”

Harry frowned at his long-time friend. “Be careful with that, Hermione,” he stated both in concern and warning. “The penalties for breaking the contract were meant for my enemies, not my friends.”

“Is that a threat?” she questioned in a low tone.

“No,” Harry answered, shaking his head. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Then absolve me from the contract,” she challenged.

Again, Harry shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

“Then don’t feign concern for my well-being.” She stalked away with a huff leaving Harry still standing on the steps wondering how their friendship had spiralled so far out of control.

By the time he reached the common room, Hermione was nowhere to be seen – presumably already up in her dorm. Since he still struggled to sleep at night, Harry decided to forgo his usual early bedtime and spent the night playing Exploding Snap with Ron and Neville. Ginny joined in for a couple games, but she spent most of the evening in the company of her friends. Finally, well after most had already retired, Harry and his friends traipsed upstairs to their beds.

The following morning, after a night filled with tossing and turning and restless sleep, Harry jogged around the lake one last time before the holidays, enjoying the serenity of the lake and Hogwarts grounds. There had not been many constants for him throughout the year save for this well-worn path and the witch jogging beside him, and he was loathe to leave either even for just a couple months. After stretching a bit, he and Ginny headed back up to the castle. On their way up the steps, the doors opened revealing the headmaster standing in florid, purple robes. "Ah, Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, I thought I might find you here."

Harry raised an eyebrow as Ginny greeted, "Good morning, Headmaster." Harry mirrored her sentiments.

"Good morning to you both," Dumbledore said. "I do not mean to intrude upon your morning exercises, but I was wondering if I might borrow Mr. Potter for a moment. There are some things we must discuss prior to your departure."

Harry shared a glance with Ginny before turning back to the headmaster and nodding his head. "All right." Turning back to Ginny, he gave her a chaste kiss and said, "I'll see you later."

Ginny reached over and gave his hand a squeeze before nodding to the headmaster and walking into the entrance hall ahead of them.

"Shall we, Mr. Potter?" Harry walked with the man in silence as they ascended to his office. As Harry followed Dumbledore into the room, he felt a weight settle in the pit of his stomach. He had been waiting for the headmaster to make his next move, and he had a strong feeling that this was far from just a friendly meeting.

At least there was one welcome presence to greet him in the office. "Hello, Fawkes," Harry called as he walked over to his perch. The phoenix leaned into his touch and trilled in pleasure as Harry stroked the plumage behind his neck. Giving Fawkes one last scratch, Harry turned to the headmaster. "What did you want to talk to me about, sir?"

“Straight to the point, I see,” Dumbledore commented. “Please, feel free to take a seat.”

Harry walked behind the offered chair shaking his head. “No thanks. I don’t like to sit still just after I’ve run. My legs will get stiff,” he dissembled.

The headmaster smiled. “Ah, the troubles of youth. You’ll find as you grow older that your legs will remain stiff no matter what you do.”

Harry shrugged.

“I wonder if you’ve given any further thought to our unfinished discussion the morning you and Miss Weasley returned,” Dumbledore stated conversationally.

Harry frowned. “To be frank, yes.”

“And?”

“My opinion remains unchanged,” Harry answered bluntly. “I understand your concerns for my safety both as a student as well as the subject of the prophecy, but I will be seventeen in a month, leaving one of your points moot. As for the other, I reiterate the need for experience if I ever hope to stand a chance against Voldemort. As much as I have progressed over the past year, I know I am still outclassed.”

“Have you given consideration to the fact that the power he knows not may not require you to duel with Tom?” Dumbledore countered.

Harry considered this for a moment. “I suppose it’s a possibility, but how many lives are you willing to stake on it?”

The headmaster sighed deeply. “I do not think the prophecy mandates that you must be the one to deal the killing blow to Tom,” he stated. Stroking the long length of his beard, he added, “Tom has taken many steps down the road to immortality, as his resurrection

two years ago proves. I believe your part in this war will be to make Tom mortal once again."

Though he did not entirely agree with the man's words, he knew the headmaster had over a century's worth of knowledge. Ignoring his words entirely would be foolish. "Assuming this is the case, do you not think I may need to be on the battlefield to accomplish this goal?"

"Perhaps you may," Dumbledore agreed. "But in that case, you would not be alone. There are many out there willing to give their lives to bring about the fall of Voldemort."

"And I am one of them," Harry inserted, doing his best to keep his voice level.

"That is exactly what concerns me most," the headmaster answered softly. "You are a brave and selfless young man, and I do not doubt that you would trade your life so that others might live. You must understand, however, that you cannot save every life. You cannot win every battle. You are too important to this war to risk losing your life before you have fulfilled your task. These are realities that one your age should never have to realise, but this war will force many to mature far too quickly. I beg of you, Mr. Potter – Harry – to heed my words. I know your desire is only to help – to do something to help bring about Voldemort's fall, but you will have your time. Until then, please, allow me to arrange your safety as we work out a way to strip Tom of his immortality."

Harry bowed his head. His headmaster's voice was thick with emotion, and Harry knew deep down that the man was being completely genuine. He knew that Dumbledore cared for him, and Harry could not help but feel that Dumbledore's feelings were clouding his judgment. If the headmaster had been this open with Harry a year ago, he probably would have taken the man at his word and followed whatever he prescribed. In the past year, however, Harry had seen and experienced too much to blindly trust the headmaster's interpretation of the prophecy and his course of action.

The more he thought about it, the more he believed in his own course. Had Voldemort never heard the prophecy, he would never have targeted Harry and thus would not have fulfilled a part of the prophecy, marking Harry as 'his equal'. Had Harry not heard the prophecy last year after his godfather's death, he would never have done half the things he did over the year. The prophecy was a catalyst that spurred its subjects into fulfilling it. Harry had no idea where this idea sprang from, but as soon as he thought it, he knew it to be true.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster," Harry stated after a long moment of reflection. He almost surprised himself with the amount of emotion conveyed in his voice. "I wish I could share in your vision, but I cannot. I know you may think my actions foolish and rash, but I could not live doing anything other than what I know to be right, and I know that I've been doing right."

Silence stretched over the pair as the headmaster hung his head. Sighing, Dumbledore looked up at Harry and said, "Then it is as I feared. Are you certain you cannot be swayed from this path?"

Harry nodded with a frown on his face as he puzzled over how the headmaster would respond.

"I had hoped it would not come to this."

That was all the warning he received before the headmaster's wand was pointed at him and a spell fired. One of the very few benefits to growing up with the Dursleys was that a lifetime spent dodging surprise attacks gave Harry incredible reflexes. He ducked and rolled to the side, bringing up a shield against the next onslaught of spells sent by the usually calm and kindly man. Distantly he heard the door slam shut and felt a wave of magic pass through the room; he recognised anti-Portkey wards, among others. Dumbledore was not taking any chances.

The headmaster began pouring more power into his spells, forcing Harry to push more power into his shield as he considered his options. He needed to get out of there fast. His magic was still not fully

replenished; Harry would not be able to hold off the headmaster for long. Holding the shield in front of him with one hand as spells continued to dissipate against it, Harry slowly stood to his feet, meeting the headmaster's eyes.

Fawkes gave a mournful cry, and Dumbledore paused, flicking his eyes to the phoenix and then back to him. Harry used the moment of distraction to jut one of his hands towards the window. A blasting curse shattered the glass, and a moment later, Harry vaulted through the opening.

He leaned forward into a dive and silently cast Arresto Momentum to slow his fall. Transforming into his panther form, Harry landed, setting off at a sprint the moment his paws touched the ground. He began some evasive manoeuvres as he felt spells hurled in his direction. As he felt a Summoning Spell attempt to draw him back towards the castle, he unleashed a burst of magic to dispel the charm.

He quickly made it to the gates at the edge of the wards. After he crossed, he reverted back to human form and turned around. He could just barely see the silhouette of the headmaster standing at his office window as Harry Disapparated with barely a whisper of displaced air.